BODY POLITICS

DISEASE, DESIRE, AND THE FAMILY

EDITED BY

MICHAEL RYAN

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POLITICS AND CULTURE 1

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Introduction

MICHAEL RYAN

OUR CULTURE—our very white, very male, and very heterosexual culture—teaches us to ignore bodies. It does so because it fears the implications of attending to body politics.

The heterosexual white males who largely shape and run our world don't like bodies. They prefer the abstractions of moral mythography, which transform people and things like welfare mothers, communism, Saddam Hussein, gays and lesbians, homelessness, economic inequality, and the like into allegorical figures like "Evil," "Individual Responsibility," and "Political Correctness." Those people and things are thereby denied the complex modes of representation they deserve, modes that elude moral allegorization. Moral allegorization is especially difficult when one is connected bodily to the people and things one represents. Would we so easily have chanted mass slogans of patriotic hysteria if we were obliged to meet the parents and widows of the 150,000 men killed in Iraq? If we had to help dig their graves?

The heterosexual white males don't like the political complications that result when you think about people and things in terms of your own material connections to them or in terms of their own material connectedness to each other. Such connections run counter to the imperatives of their own psychosexual makeup, which disconnects out of a fear of relational loss, a horror of dirt, a desire for phallic control, a hysteria verging on violence that is the essence of the competition for power, and a perversion that over time becomes confused with an acceptable normality. That perversion of disconnectedness translates those imperatives into social rules and hierarchies that assure the power and survival of these men by sanitizing the world of its bodily character. The painful anguish of hunger and homelessness becomes the superiority of freedom to community; the mean-spirited subordination of one to another becomes the triumph of efficiency; and the violence of regimented inequality becomes the embodiment of rationality. Such reasonable disconnection banishes to the realm of sentimentality all those bodily emotions that might undo the rigorous reasons that serve as alibis for systemic murder. And these men do indeed tend to kill any-body that gets in the way of the abstract machinery, any-body who insists on the priority of bodies—of such things as hunger, homelessness, plague, and torture—to the hetero-male ideals of freedom, domesticity, efficiency, national security, and the like.

These men react so violently to the world of matter in part because they are afraid of the involuntary movements to which their own bodies are prone, movements of panic, hysteria, and excretion that are not subject to regimentation, to the policing that assures the dignity and the position of the great white male in relation to all the endangering margins—women, nonwhites, gays and lesbians, anticapitalists, and the like—that threaten his power and his identity. It's hard to know which came first—the abstraction from bodies that grounds the power of these men or the various domestic, national, cultural, and economic institutions that promote and enforce the process of abstraction on which they thrive. We may never know. But neither should we much care. We have a far more important matter to attend to: dismantling the world these men have built for themselves. This book is an effort in that direction.

The matters addressed in the following pages are ones preferably ignored or rendered abstract by big-boy culture—the plague of AIDS, the extermination of 150,000 young Iraqi men for the sake of proving George Bush's phallicity, the concentrationing of women in families, the radical contradiction of homeowning ideology and the social pathology of homelessness, the comic dysfunctionality of drunks declaring war on drugs, the torture and mutilation of the body of dissent, the banal violence of chauvinist ethnic identity, and so on. ... But we address as well the tremendous creative potential of all of us who labor that threatens to elude and undo the power of capital, the ultimate artifice of matter itself—the cyborg in all of us—that so frightens the big boys, and the threat of constitutional revision, the possibility that we might all—all of us this time—start over again from scratch and rewrite our world.

We assume that a first step in any revision of the world these men have created is to materialize oneself. Self-materialization desanitizes the abstractions of power. It leads necessarily to a sense of dispossession, an abandonment of the safe havens of abstraction. Lost most notably are control and distance, a sense of safe separation from the varieties of bodily pain, violence, and hysteria that are the causes and the consequences of hetero-male power.

To read with us requires that you disengage yourself from certain distancing procedures. You must agree to move and be moved, to depart from whatever place you now occupy and to undertake an emotional as much as an intellectual journey. Form a connection to certain kinds of bodily pain, from homelessness and alcoholism to torture and disappearance.

There are a lot of good ideas to be found here, but we would also like you to take away a sense that what you do with your own life and your own body matters as much as any good thinking you might encounter here. In addition to reflecting on what we have to say, we ask you to extend this book into the world, connect it with other physical realities and other material things. Other, if you will, body politics. The form of such extra-textual connection is necessarily active rather

than simply cognitive. It can consist of donating money to AIDS research or giving a speech at a demonstration the next time the big boys murder in your name. And while doing whatever you do, let your mind explore the possibility that sometime, somewhere, a world might exist where you wouldn't have to. Then you will have entered the realm into which we wish to invite you.

Welcome to *Body Politics.*

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The Politics of the "Gay Plague": AIDS as a U.S. Ideology

HENRY ABELOVE

In memory of Jack Winkler

FROM THE FIRST notice of AIDS in the United States until now, about 55 percent to 60 percent of the cases diagnosed have been among gay men. Roughly the same percent of the deaths have been among gay men, and in the earliest years of the epidemic in the United States, the disease was commonly believed to be largely a liability of the gay male culture and of those unlucky enough to be transfused with blood from gay donors. "Gay plague," AIDS was often then called. We spoke that term or heard it spoken and maybe felt a shudder of fear and revulsion.

At present the proportion of gay men among those dying is said to be declining. But this decline is also said to be proceeding slowly. Some projections suggest that even in 1992, the majority of the annual AIDS fatalities in the United States will still be gay men. Nevertheless, the term "gay plague" isn't spoken or heard as often as it was a while back. So many news stories have lately appeared about the vulnerability of intravenous drug users to AIDS, about the prenatal infection of infants born to HIV sero-positive mothers, even about the gradually rising incidence of HIV transmission in heterosexual sex!

Just a few years ago, in the mid-1980s, in the era of the term "gay plague," the view usual among government functionaries, among people in the health-care industry, and maybe among American newspaper readers generally, had been that transmission in heterosexual sex was really likely only in Africa. Some American medical scientists had even developed a theory to rationalize this view. Call it the theory of the very, very bad African vagina. What they had argued was that vaginas, unlike assholes, were ordinarily far too strong to be penetrable by HIV. After all, vaginas were built tough, by nature, to accommodate a mighty thrusting dick

and childbirth, too. In Africa, however, the naturally strong vagina deteriorated. For venereal diseases of many kinds must of course be endemic there, and medical care must be scanty and inefficient. So African vaginas would be raw and chancred in consequence of repeated venereal infections that were uncured or incompletely cured and these vaginas would therefore be disastrously open to HIV. In the United States there were virtually no such deteriorated vaginas.[1]

This theory had been widely promulgated and accepted, and it has not yet been widely disavowed. But we hear less of it now than formerly, just as we hear less of the term "gay plague" and more talk emanating from almost everywhere about how AIDS ought to be a matter of concern for all Americans. Lesbians, to be sure, experience much difficulty in finding themselves inside that "all." As usual, they remain invisible. News stories or posters on HIV transmission virtually never discuss risk levels in lesbian sexual behaviors. But the discourse of prevention, though it tends importantly to except lesbians, is otherwise now rapidly universalizing, and those authoritative voices speaking to us, and through us, suggesting that HIV prefers to kill gay men and Africans, are now relatively muted.

What purpose does the new tendency to universalizing serve? Please note that it is just a tendency. Older notions still persist,[2] if less pervasively than before, and as I've just remarked, lesbians are hardly comprehended in the new and enlarged discourse of prevention. One purpose the tendency serves is to deflect attention from the actual deaths of an extraordinarily high number of gay male Americans, all of whom should have died hereafter. Another purpose is to obscure the extent to which American responses to AIDS have been, and still are, saliently conditioned by the epidemiological accident that the disease appeared here on a large-scale basis first and most noticeably among gay men. A third purpose is to reassert and reinforce both racism and conventional, regulative positions about sex and the family. I wish I could say that the most important purpose of all was to save lives. But the new, enlarged discourse of prevention does not give foremost place to the saving of lives. On the contrary, life is subordinate to the other purposes the discourse is meant to serve. I know of no recent U.S. news feature on AIDS prevention, no pronouncement by any official of any state government or of the federal government, no message from any health-care industry authority, any hospital, any physicians' organization, or any insurance company that has been primarily concerned with saving lives. Certainly government policy on prevention has not been primarily concerned with saving lives.

Another way of saying what I mean: If the earlier discourse, summarily describable as the discourse of the gay plague and the very, very bad African vagina, was meant to speak the conviction that those who had AIDS owed it to their loathesomeness, the new discourse is meant to speak a preference for returning the lesbian-gay community to oblivion (the men backgrounded or forgotten, the women made invisible) while reestablishing the primacy of the U.S. bourgeois white family.

I know that what I've just said, particularly by way of characterizing the new and enlarged discourse of prevention, will seem cryptic. I intend to try to clarify it, but I mustn't pretend that the work of communication will be easy. What I'm going to examine are voices that are inside of us as well as outside of us, voices that constitute us as well as regulate us. Trying to know anything about what's most familiar must produce a sense of strangeness, difficulty. It's like taking your pulse with your own finger.

Before I go on with my task of clarification, I want to pause and talk some about the quilt, or the Names Project, as it is also called, and, to borrow a couple of words of Milton's from his elegy, "somewhat loudly" recall those dead of AIDS. You may perhaps know that the quilt is a memorial of an unusual kind. It's made up of many, many separate panels, all the same size, six by three feet, the size of a grave, but each naming a different person, each sewn by that person's lovers, friends, relatives, each saying or picturing something evocative of that person's life. Anyone dead of AIDS can be memorialized there, but the names on the panels are overwhelmingly of gay men, partly because, as I've already said, a substantial majority of the fatalities in the United States have been gay men, partly because the quilt has been greatly favored by the lesbian-gay community almost from the moment the first several panels were sewn together.

But why is the quilt favored, and what does it represent anyway? Or perhaps we should ask why isn't the favored memorial something more usual—a statue in a park or a city square, a stained-glass window, a specially dedicated and newly established hospital, a laboratory or a lecture hall at a university? First of all, no public space, no park, no square could in a certain sense be *appropriate* as a site. For in the public domain we gay men and lesbians are unwelcome. In twenty-three of the fifty states our sexual behaviors are still criminalized. In some of these states the penalties stipulated in law for our sexual behaviors are very heavy and can amount to five years' imprisonment. Enforcement of the laws against us isn't of course uniformly stringent, and there are jurisdictions where there is no enforcement. Even in those jurisdictions, however, there is the potential of enforcement, and perhaps more to the point, we who live there or pass through must feel a kind of edgy awareness that in the still-official view of these states' governments, we become criminals whenever we act like ourselves. In forty-three states there is no specific protection for us in law if, on account of our sexual orientation, we are discriminated against in employment or housing or credit. Only in seven states, and in some cities in other states, is there specific legal protection for us from such discrimination. Even in those jurisdictions where we enjoy some protection, our entitlement is typically very qualified. Take Massachusetts, for instance. There the act that protects us against discrimination was lately passed after a seventeen-year-long struggle. It may yet be challenged in a referendum whose proponent says that the state's voters will cancel the act when they have the chance to do so.

He may be right; the voters of Irvine, California, cancelled their new lesbian-gay rights act in a recent referendum.

For now the Massachusetts act is binding, but as worded it takes from us perhaps as much as it allows us. What it says is that nothing in the act should be construed to mean that the state of Massachusetts "condones" homosexuality, as though to declare that our lives require but do not deserve condoning. The lesbian-gay rights bill that failed to pass the Connecticut legislature in 1987 contained the same qualification. The Connecticut bill's failure to pass was saddening and appalling. But since the bill included that qualification, passage would also have been saddening and appalling. (A similar bill did finally pass in Connecticut in 1991.) From the American commonweal we have been excluded, and our favored memorial to our losses cannot be easily in public space because we ourselves are not yet permitted to belong to the public, even *de jure*, even in law.

Nor would we be likely to favor a church- or synagogue-based memorial. In the view of those denominations to which the overwhelming majority of Americans committed to organized religion feel loyal, our sexual behaviors are simply sinful. In the view of some other, smaller denominations, our sexual behaviors are maybe almost acceptable, provided of course that each of us practices sex only in the context of an intimate, ongoing relationship with one other person, that is, in the context of a simulacrum of a heterosexual marriage as ideally conceived. This conditional almost-acceptance is about as much of a boon to us as the legislative refusal to condone. Both gestures are also in a certain sense alike. Both displace us, one to tell us of what we don't deserve, the other to tell us of what we might nearly deserve, if only we approached closer to the one great good.

Nor would we be any more likely to favor the financing of a hospital or medical laboratory as a memorial. The health-care industry in the United States has long been our antagonist. Until relatively recently, the doctors, for instance, regarded us all without exception as sick. We were sick just because we were lesbian or gay. Homosexuality was a disease in their official list of diseases. In 1973, as a result of intense, hostile pressure from us, the doctors dropped their commitment to the view that homosexuality was a disease. But in 1977 they added a new disease to their list of diseases. They called it "ego-dystonic homosexuality," or in simpler language, homosexuality that doesn't fit well with an individual's ego.[3] This disease, they assured us, was characteristic of only some gay people. They did not simultaneously add to their list another new disease called ego-dystonic heterosexuality, presumably because they imagined that heterosexuality always did, or always should, fit well with any human ego. "Ego-dystonic homosexuality" remains a diagnostic category, and it testifies to the continuing interest the doctors have in pathologizing us.

As for the colleges and universities, popular as they may be as recipients of memorial gifts, they would not do for our memorial. The level of bigotry against lesbians and gay men within the universities is breathtakingly high. Although very current personal testimonies to this bigotry can be easily gathered, the last survey

research demonstrating it is now about a decade old. When the chairs of 640 U.S. sociology departments were questioned, some 63 percent said they would be reluctant to hire an openly gay scholar and 84 percent said they would be reluctant to hire an openly gay, activist scholar.[4] A decade may be a long time. Yet I know of no reason to suppose that a similar survey done tomorrow would yield results much different.

For the state we cannot be condoned or protected, and in many instances we are even criminalized. For the big churches we are always sinful, for some of the smaller churches, conditionally almost-acceptable if we try hard enough to pass. For the health-care industry we are intrinsically pathological, at least potentially, and for higher education we have long been an object of frank bigotry. These institutions all exclude us to protect yet another institution, the family.

To understand the Names Project, you must know all this. Otherwise you may miss the significance of its most salient feature, its removability. The project, like us, has no ongoing places of its own on American soil, no necessary connection anywhere to any major American institution. Nothing located or fixed could serve well as a memorial to our losses. The Names Project's other features may be more readily summed up. It's a quilt, something that gives warmth and comfort, because these are what we now need. It's a quilt because quilts traditionally were made by women and all of us in the lesbian-gay community are in a sense women. We gay men are socially gendered female, no matter how butch we may look, and lesbians are socially gendered female too, though perhaps less emphatically than the men. When anyone identifies performatively with the feminine, the gesture is called camp. The quilt is a production of camp, chastened by great sorrow. It's a quilt because quilts were traditionally a conjoining of many separate and very particular pieces. Our losses are like that, too. Each of them is distinctive, but they have a special weight and purport collectively. So many have died, particularly of the generation that came to maturity during the 1960s, that the proper term for these losses taken together may be, as Simon Watney says, "ethnocide." What the quilt figures is a destruction so extensive that it threatens the discontinuance of a whole culture.[5] Younger lesbians and gay men, as they wander around the quilt, may see no name that they recognize, but their sense of loss, however formless, is still acute. As they try to explain themselves and their pain, they often report that they feel as though they have missed out on everything; and that "everything" is typically understood to be the happy carefree sex of the 1970s. "Everything" probably does include that, but its crucial significance is different. What they mostly miss is an opportunity to learn their own culture. It isn't something they can learn from parents; it's rarely something they can learn at school; and from peers they can learn it in only very incomplete ways. The Names Project names those who ought to be present to transmit the culture to a younger generation but who are gone, destroyed. Since the loss is so importantly collective, each panel has been attached to the others, and all are united.

I shall describe just one part of a particular panel. Then I'll return to the new, enlarged, and universalizing discourse of prevention, which as I said before has among its several purposes the deflecting of attention from the actual deaths of a very large number of gay men. That's a purpose I have of course been deliberately opposing by my account of the Names Project. In so opposing, I have also been tacitly explaining, or trying to explain, what produces that purpose. For the oblivion these dead are now assigned is produced by the same phenomena that gave them nowhere to live, the same phenomena that allocated to them illness and early death in a measure so terrible and disproportionate. Jean Valentine referred to this particular panel at the start of her poem titled "X." Remarkably enough for what is, after all, a part of the Names Project, the panel includes no name. There are just these words: "I have decorated this banner to honor my brother. Our parents did not want his name used publicly."[6]

Removable, unsituateable in any one place or institution, comforting and camp, various but conjoined so as to figure a collective loss that amounts to ethnocide, the quilt is incidentally as telling an expression of American art as any in our times. It has of course no artist, no price, and it cannot be reproduced, though it can be temporarily divided, and it can and will be added to. It is also, in some part, written, as the panel I've just mentioned so poignantly testifies, by the same phenomena it struggles to reverse, the phenomena that want oblivion for the lesbian and gay community.

I proceed from the quilt to a political cartoon that was reproduced during the summer of 1989, and widely so, a cartoon signed by an artist named H. Payne and sold by the Scripps Howard/United Feature Syndicate to hundreds of American newspapers. I saw it first in the *Hartford Courant*, a newspaper in the big Times-Mirror chain, which in 1988 earned $331.9 million on revenues of $3.33 billion. Like the quilt, the cartoon offers itself as memorializing those dead of AIDS. But the cartoon also works as a warning, a warning that's now conventionally part of the new, enlarged, universalizing discourse of prevention. The cartoon takes the term "flower children" and the types to whom the term might be thought to belong and, killing them off, gives them flowers with a vengeance. I should explain that the term "flower children" comes originally from Pete Seeger's 1960s song "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" When the song was first popular, C. Day Lewis argued that it was the contemporary inheritor of the lyric tradition in European poetry, and certainly the song engages that tradition.[7] The flowers that are gone, that are no longer available for mourning because too many men have been killed in too many wars now, and so too many flowers have had to be picked to honor them, are the flowers of elegies like Milton's, the flowers that he still had available to strew over Lycidas's hearse: amaranthus, primrose, violet, jessamine, woodbine, cowslips, daffidillies. Seeger sings: "Where have all the flowers gone / long time passing? / Where have all the flowers gone / long time ago? / Where have all the flowers gone? / Young girls have picked them every one. / Oh when will they

ever learn? / When will they ever learn?"* Those in the 1960s who agreed that there were no flowers left for mourning, especially for mourning the people killed in the war in Vietnam, were called "flower children." On the left in the cartoon, three of them are pictured, probably at the Woodstock Festival, reclining together on a blanket and enjoying themselves. The next frame changes reclining to recumbency, in fact to death, which is presumably the proper consequence of nonproductive reclining. But these three deserve death or create it not just because they are nonproductive. The man on the left has spoken for peace and so is responsible for the war refugees; the man on the right has smoked pot and so is responsible for death due to drug overdosing; the ungendered and not discernibly lesbian, gay, or straight one in the middle has chosen "free love," instead of the costly and constraining kind associated with marriage, and so is responsible for AIDS deaths.

This cartoon repeats connections that already are firmly embossed in our minds and so makes a kind of familiar sense, even though there may be nothing in the cartoon that is really sensible. The responsibility for the terrible fate of the war refugees of Southeast Asia may belong at least arguably to the war makers rather than to the peace advocates. Death due to excess may be the fate of some 1960s-style dropouts who do pot, but I know of no evidence to show that such death is more likely for them than for their opposites, the achievers who never touch illegal drugs but who exceed differently, say by overeating, overworking, and jet-setting, and so have coronaries, strokes, and crashes. "Free love" doesn't make anybody vulnerable to AIDS, though unsafe sexual practices do. These, however, may or may not be part of nonmarital sex. Similarly, marriage is no prophylaxis against AIDS; HIV is, oddly enough, indifferent as to whether or not its prospective human hosts wear wedding rings. Insofar as this cartoon is about AIDS, and I think it is centrally about AIDS, it does nothing to help in the work of universal prevention in which it seems to be engaged. On the contrary, the cartoon makes prevention less manageable, less doable. For what is necessary for prevention is obfuscated here. But the cartoon does succeed in directing us toward productivity, support for war and empire, achievement, and marriage. If any of these has dangers, the cartoon hides them. It also leads us to see the person with AIDS (PWA) as someone responsible for her or his own death. This is a responsibility determined in a special way.

No woman who dies in bearing a legitimate child (bearing legitimate children is her rightful vocation after all) is likely to be figured as responsible for her own death, though it is the outcome of an avoidable sexual act. What determines responsibility isn't the fact that this PWA has performed an act that culminates eventually in death. Other acts, even sexual acts, culminate eventually in death

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*"Where have All the Flowers Gone?" by Pete Seeger. Copyright © by Fall River Music, Inc. (renewed). *All rights reserved. Used by permission.*