Remembering the AIDS Quilt

Morris III, Charles E.

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From San Francisco to Atlanta and Back Again: Ideologies of Mobility in the AIDS Quilt’s Search for a Homeland

Daniel C. Brouwer

Having been approved to teach an undergraduate special topics course on “Rhetorics of HIV/AIDS” during the Spring 2006 semester, I programmed readings about the AIDS Quilt for a unit on ritual. Midway through the semester, I invited students to design, as one of two options for a formal, graded assignment, a panel for someone they knew who had died from AIDS-related complications and defend why they chose to memorialize the person in that particular way. To craft this assignment, I visited the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt Web site for the first time in many years. Although my main task of finding the organization’s instructions for making panels was highly instrumental, I was struck by the very first image that greeted me at the site and returned to it after finding the information I was seeking. In the image, nine women of color, one sitting and eight standing, appear behind a long table upon which a panel rests. The intricate patterns and stitching evidence great skill. A textual fragment
on the panel reading “Lord Remem” is visible. The image seemingly captures a communal effort to complete a new panel for a loved one.

The image both made perfect sense and startled me. Sensibly, the image articulated important intersections among women, race, and HIV/AIDS. I have long essayed to attend to these intersections in my service, pedagogy, and politics. Indeed, in 2000 I taught a class titled “Women and AIDS: Rhetorical Investigations,” and in preparation for and conjunction with that course I volunteered for nearly eight months at the Chicago Women’s AIDS Project, where on a weekly basis I invested in learning more about and helping to respond to the urgent needs of women, particularly women of color. Further, across the span of a decade, my curricula for that and three similar courses have reflected my desire to learn and teach about intersections of race, sex, and infection and changing demographics of HIV/AIDS nationally and internationally. More, I have been generally cognizant of the histories of quilting among African American women. For these reasons, the AIDS Quilt Web site image made perfect sense. But still, even as the Quilt has always described itself as an artifact for the full variety of people who die from AIDS-related complications, and even as I have always known and believed this, my startled response to the NAMES Project image revealed to me my habitualized thinking of the Quilt as an artifact especially significant to gay men. The image reminded me that the NAMES Project had relocated from San Francisco—its queer birthplace—to Atlanta—a center of New South black politics—in part to be closer to and better serve communities of color, specifically African Americans. I wondered further about the dynamics of its travels—where it had gone geographically, politically, pedagogically, and in the social imaginary—since I had been away from it for so long.

Two key controversies about the AIDS Quilt span the years 2001–2007. Specifically, these controversies are the relocation of the Quilt from San Francisco to Atlanta in 2001 and the firing of NAMES Project founder and spokesperson Cleve Jones in 2003, a dispute that prompted a number of lawsuits and settlements between Jones and the national organization. These controversies bring to the forefront the importance of ideologies about place and movement. Embedded in these controversies is an assumption about the nature of the Quilt—that it does its work best when
it engages in “promiscuous mobility.” Yet this assumption stands alongside an equally strong assumption about the Quilt’s need to rest in an appropriate homeland. Thus, these controversies nominate mobility as both a key topic for analysis and a conceptual resource.

I employ mobility as a conceptual framework for exploring themes of movement, space, place, homeland, and ownership in these two controversies and for exploring the intersections of these themes with sexuality and race. The key mobilities in these controversies include the invocation of homelands, shifting commitments to mobility, and competing notions about the proper relationship among texts, people, and places. Further, while especially the Quilt’s relocation from San Francisco to Atlanta pivots on sexuality and race, these controversies are not easily reducible to or fundamentally attributable to eruptions of racism in the queer community or homophobia in communities of color. Instead, variegated lines of identification demonstrate the provisional and constructed nature of home, homeland, and travel.

**Ideologies of Mobility**

Studies in mobility make movement the figure instead of the ground of critical analysis. Such studies typically couple the fact of movement—whether grand (as in an “exodus”) or mundane (as in a “stroll around the block”)—with exploration of ideologies about place, space, home, homeland, travel, tourism, and other variations of movement. Describing mobility as “socially produced motion,” Tim Cresswell invites analysis of mobility at three related levels: the plain fact, or empirical reality, of mobility; representations of mobility; and embodied experiences of mobility. A critical approach to the study of mobility, in his view, invests in adding “power, politics, and ideology” to its lexicon. Attending to power, politics, and ideology, Mimi Sheller and John Urry nominate “questions of exclusion, disconnection, bypassing and differentiation . . . [as] . . . central to thinking about mobilities and their implications.” Mobility is rarely unfettered, for example, and mobility is best recognized as a disparately available symbolic resource or material possibility. Mobility is also best understood as a historical production, its meanings having
been as strongly associated with freedom, opportunity, and progress as with deviance, danger, and “social pathology.” Whether mobility takes the form of tourism, diasporic dispersal, or other sorts of travel, whether it is chosen or coerced or forced, joyful or reluctant, critical studies of mobility attend to the facts of movement, representations of movement, and embodied experiences of movement. More, mobility studies attend to reticence or intransigence toward movement, or the value of staying still and defending place, home, and homeland.

Ideologies of Mobility in HIV/AIDS

AIDS is both an epidemic and an “epidemic of signification.” When AIDS is understood as an epidemic, mobility emerges as “a key issue in understanding patterns of HIV infection.” Charting how HIV moves from cell to cell, person to person, population to population, and nation to nation have long been interests of virologists and epidemiologists. Notably, in epidemiology mobility has largely been understood as a problem or detriment. Indeed, epidemiologists have long addressed the seeming threat posed by the unchecked circulation of HIV-infected people (as immigrants, sex workers, or agriculture laborers, for example), and nations have frequently crafted legislation to regulate the flows of HIV-infected people within and across their borders. When AIDS is understood as an epidemic of signification, or a proliferation of meanings, mobility emerges as a recurrent theme shaping the meanings of representations of HIV/AIDS. In that spirit, Meredith Raimondo’s analysis of HIV/AIDS mobilities in U.S. media representations explores “the ideologies of race, gender, sexuality, class, and nation” and “the relationship of identity and place.” Raimondo argues that mobility occurs and is conceptualized at various “scales” (such as the cellular, the individual, the community, and the national) and that conceptualizations of HIV at one scale often inform conceptualizations of HIV at other scales. Further, Raimondo’s analysis illustrates that when we study AIDS as an epidemic of signification, meanings of mobility also tend toward the detrimental. As an illustration, people who are imagined to practice excessive or clandestine mobility, such as wealthy and jet-setting
gay white men, sex (and other) tourists, flight attendants, philandering spouses, bisexuals, and men on the down low, have appeared as insidious characters in representations of HIV/AIDS.

Key features of the AIDS Quilt interrupt the tendency to think of HIV/AIDS mobilities as detrimental. Attending to the manner by which single panels make their way into the larger U.S. AIDS Quilt, for example, foregrounds mobility as participatory and communal. Makers of single panels (which, at three-by-six feet, approximate the size of a grave) transport the panel either to a local NAMES Project chapter or directly to the national NAMES Project office. Local chapters perform a number of functions, including the integration of new panels into the national artifact and a national community of people with HIV/AIDS. Importantly, for those who choose to transport their panel to a local chapter in person or by mail, doing so may allow those vernacular memorializers to ritualize the letting go of their panel and the addition of the loved one’s name to the national artifact in a place that is close to home. After the national office receives a panel, the office processes the panel, notifies the sender of receipt, and sews the panel into a twelve-by-twelve-foot block with other panels. When a block is complete, it becomes available for travel and display.

From its inception the Quilt has been assumed to function best under conditions of “promiscuous mobility,” or unfettered circulation. As a key feature of the AIDS Quilt, promiscuous mobility describes the need for the panels that compose the Quilt to circulate vigorously and endlessly so that they can perform their political and pedagogical functions of naming the dead, raising visibility, informing and inspiring people, and promoting solidarity and collective memory. At different moments during the controversies that I am studying, for example, eventual adversaries Cleve Jones and Julie Rhoad agree that, as Rhoad affirms, the “Quilt is always on the road.” In addition to traditional local site displays and occasional national and international tours of the U.S. Quilt, the NAMES Project facilitates the Quilt’s promiscuous mobility through creation and support of more than forty international affiliate chapters (in Guam, Guatemala, Romania, Taiwan, Uganda, Northern Ireland, Japan, Argentina, Suriname, Cuba, and elsewhere) and through online image display of all received and processed panels. Yet the announcement of
the Quilt’s relocation from San Francisco to Atlanta animated a different version of mobility that affirmed ideologies of home and homeland; these affirmations of home and homeland were not entirely consonant with the principle of promiscuous mobility. Its move from San Francisco to Atlanta represented a significant and controversial rerouting of the Quilt, crafting new combinations of memory, fantasy, people, and place as it unsettled long-standing combinations of those elements.

From San Francisco . . .

Michael Lee Tiffany—son, brother, partner, artist, paleontologist, and more—died of AIDS-related causes in San Francisco in December 1998. In December 2005 family and friends completed a Quilt panel for him. To Eddie, who moved to San Francisco in 1988, Michael was an unrequited love whose affective policy of not falling in love with seronegative partners cast Eddie into the bittersweet realm of friendship. Michael’s mother and several of his friends engaged in conversations about how to memorialize Michael. With another friend designing the panel and a second friend performing most of the initial labor, Eddie received the work-in-progress, labored on three smaller portions, and made the final hand stitches to complete the panel.

Eddie’s labors on the textile fragments dramatize the Quilt’s potential mobilities. In San Francisco parks, at softball games, on airplanes, on camping trips, and elsewhere, Eddie worked on panel fragments, publicly performing the act of memorializing and testifying. In ways mundane and profound, this public labor engendered queries about Michael, the challenges of quilting, and the process of remembering. A worker at a fabric store donated twenty dollars after learning about Michael and the effort to create a panel for him. A UPS employee who asked Eddie if the package, on its way to Michael’s mother in Montana, contained anything fragile or of value listened to the story. Well-traveled in San Francisco, the completed panel then traveled to Bozeman, Montana, for a temporary stay with Michael’s mother, Irma. Restless in Montana, the panel traveled with Irma as she visited with her other children. Four months later, the panel returned to Eddie in San Francisco, where, for about two months, he displayed the panel in his office in the
San Francisco’s status as a national and international queer homeland barely seems to need elaboration. Historian Nan Boyd observes, “the strength of the city’s queer communities is world renowned.” Boyd historicizes the emergence of publicly visible queer politics and socializing in San Francisco by historicizing the city itself. She starts with the commonly used expression that San Francisco has long been a “wide open town” and strives to elaborate the specific policies and practices that confirm, in important ways, that perception. While queer practices were long a part of this wide-open city, in Boyd’s assessment publicly visible queer mobilizing (political and social) emerge after 1933. In more recent times, Andrea Howe observes “guidebooks that routinely boast that San Francisco is ‘the gayest city in the United States’ and ‘gay central USA.’” The Castro neighborhood in Eureka Valley, in fact, typically stands in as queer “ground zero”—the gayest part of the gayest city.

Complicating the meaning of San Francisco, Howe advances an important argument about the difference between the frequently invoked descriptor of “queer capital” and her preferred conceptualization of “queer homeland.” She explains, “while capitals are the legislative nexuses of states, homelands offer a symbolic refuge for believers who make the pilgrimage.” In that sense, “San Francisco . . . serve[s] as an imagined homeland for queers . . . who often experience exile from, and ostracism living in, their places of origin (nation-state, community, family, and so on) . . . [and who in San Francisco] find their ‘return’ in a pilgrimage to a homeland.” In his memoir, Stitching a Revolution: The Making of an Activist, Cleve Jones narrates his own arrival to San Francisco in terms of a pilgrimage from small-town Indiana through Phoenix, Arizona, and on to “my home, its natives my people.”

The power of a homeland to inspire and unite is substantial, but as Howe and others caution, uncritical embrace of this queer homeland elides the significant differences that distinguish individuals’ and
collectives’ participation in and attachment to that homeland. Marlon Riggs’s poignant critique of the toxic, racist dimensions of the Castro neighborhood in *Tongues Untied* (1989) still stands as painful testimony to this fact. Further, sittings of the Castro neighborhood as ground zero of queer San Francisco figuratively and ideologically displace lesbians of myriad races and ethnicities, as well as people of color of myriad sexualities who physically settled and congregated in other neighborhoods of the city, such as the Tenderloin District and Forbidden City. Just as important, recognition of other collectives’ (including people of Chinese, Japanese, Filipina/o, Latina/o, and African ancestries) variegated and complex histories with and within San Francisco tempers overcoding the city as queer or assuming that the city is singularly or primarily a queer site.

The Quilt’s connections to San Francisco are extensive and varied. The story of Cleve Jones’s inspiration for the Quilt arriving while attending a commemoration in San Francisco of Harvey Milk’s assassination is well known and often told. Incorporating and opening its first office in San Francisco in 1987, the NAMES Project tapped into and was galvanized by the half century of visible queer activism that had occurred in the city. In 1987, as AIDS disproportionately appeared in gay men and warranted intensification of already existing homophobic ideologies, one can hardly imagine a more appropriate place for the Quilt to emerge and grow. Indeed, the first two panels memorialized Marvin Feldman and Ed Mock, a Jewish man and an African American man, and both gay residents of San Francisco, a fact that simultaneously indexes sexuality's participation in complex intersections of social identities and articulates gay, AIDS, and San Francisco to each other. In sum, San Francisco has become in the popular imaginary the Quilt’s place of origin and its original homeland.

Despite a *Sacramento Bee* journalist’s claim that the Quilt was born in Sacramento because Jones sewed the first panel there in 1987, counternarratives about the Quilt’s origin gain little traction. Still, this journalist’s boosterism demonstrates the important fact that claims about homelands are disputable and plural. Recognizing this, I invest in exploring, not defending, the presumption of San Francisco as the Quilt’s proper homeland. That presumption is forceful: even though the NAMES Project has always invited and accepted panels for any sort of person, the Quilt has
been repeatedly associated with queer activism. For some, that strong and enduring association renders the Quilt’s move to Atlanta unsettling and controversial.

To Atlanta . . .

For both “economic and strategic reasons,” the NAMES Project relocated the Quilt to Atlanta, thereby newly inflecting W. E. B. DuBois’s century-old heralding of Atlanta as “the new Lachesis, spinner of web and woof for the world.” The board of directors sought someplace other than San Francisco to find more affordable rental prices and thus reduce its debt. Economically, the move to Atlanta allowed the NAMES Project to increase its storage space, improve its space-to-cost ratio, and create a climate-controlled environment to aid the preservation of the Quilt. As someplace else, Atlanta was additionally appealing because it would place the Project in close proximity to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and in proximity to an African American community especially beleaguered by AIDS in a city with a visible and political African American community and a history of civil rights and human rights activism. Endorsing “strategy above sentiment,” Cleve Jones argued that relocating to Atlanta would help to render the Quilt “as useful and as powerful and as important to the African American community and its struggle against this terrible disease” as the Quilt was to the gay community of the San Francisco Bay area in earlier years. Conspicuously, across the decades of the Quilt’s existence, scholars and activists, including members of ACT UP / New York, have endorsed the remarkable artifact while condemning the organization and/or its leaders for failing to materialize its rhetorics of inclusion and diversity. Thus, Jones’s forceful and careful endorsement of the relocation and retooling of the Quilt seems to function as a compelling rejoinder to years of criticism about the Quilt’s overriding status as a chronicle of the deaths of gay white men.

Atlanta’s emergence as a center of New South black politics significantly inflects the meanings of the Quilt’s relocation there. Allison Dorsey describes Atlanta as “the preeminent city of the New South in the first generation after the end of slavery,” rising from post–Civil War
ashes “like a phoenix from the flames.” African Americans striving to make a home and a life in Atlanta created various social organizations and mobilized through black churches, whose legacy as “centers of education, social services, and political activism” continues today. Experiencing an economic boom throughout the twentieth century, Atlanta emerged as a center of black politics, especially in the 1970s. Atlanta’s status as a center of New South black politics is not uncomplicated, of course. Karen Ferguson argues that the significant class and status differences that divided black communities after the Civil War, when conservative elites and a more radicalized working class benefited disparately from Atlanta’s energetic rise, persist today. Such variation in blacks’ experiences of Atlanta undermines the ability of the city to function as an equally available material or symbolic resource.

Atlanta’s complexity as a homeland is heightened when it is recognized as a southern gay capital. Galvanized by the Stonewall riots in New York City, gay and lesbian people in Atlanta began formally organizing in 1969. In time, Atlanta gave rise to a visible and powerful LGBTQ movement, whose success was dependent upon an economically and politically progressive climate, diminishing religious opposition, recognition as a significant voting bloc, and a conscious effort to build on the city’s black civil rights legacy. Mayor Shirley Franklin and revered civil rights leader Coretta Scott King famously expressed support for local and national LGBTQ rights. Indeed, for LGBTQ African Americans, Atlanta is recognized as a “black gay capital.”

Despite Atlanta and San Francisco’s complexities as homes and homelands for a variety of collectives, in the controversy about the AIDS Quilt’s relocation the cities overwhelmingly represent, respectively, a black homeland and a queer homeland. What the basic fact of the Quilt’s relocation mobilizes are particular ideologies about San Francisco and Atlanta that shape the meanings of relocation.

According to the NAMES Project Web site, the national board of directors decided in 1997 to relocate the Quilt from San Francisco to Atlanta and Washington, D.C. According to Edward Gatta, then-president of the NAMES Project board of directors, the national office informed the forty-six local chapters about its decision to move the Quilt in March 2000. The actual transport of the Quilt did not occur until March 2001.
Despite one account that the Quilt “moved without much fanfare from its former home of San Francisco,” the move occasioned significant consternation and opposition.\textsuperscript{35} Even as she chose to move with the Quilt to Atlanta, devoted Quilt activist and long-term Quilt sewer Gert McMullin proclaimed, “we know San Francisco is the city that made the quilt, loved it, supported it during the hard times. The quilt should be there.” Further, Felicia Elizondo threatened legal action to retain and thus keep in San Francisco the over fifty panels that she had sewn and noted that some activists considered “stealing” panels to prevent their move to Atlanta.\textsuperscript{36} Additional newspaper accounts report somber crowds and the refusal by some Quilt supporters to attend the unbearable farewell ceremony.

As a member of the NAMES Project board of directors and an official spokesperson for the Quilt, Cleve Jones managed a complicated set of values, emotions, and goals by endorsing a retooling of the Quilt based on epidemiological shifts and by attenuating the link between the Quilt and its San Francisco homeland. At the time of the move, Jones affirmed that “the Quilt will always be remembered as a gift from the people of San Francisco,” even as he endorsed its journey to Atlanta.\textsuperscript{37} Capitalizing on the quality of promiscuous mobility, Jones also noted that because portions of the Quilt are always in circulation, even internationally, the national office in San Francisco was best understood as a way station rather than a resting place.\textsuperscript{38} That is, the very nature of the Quilt prevents its sedimented, sacred linkage to any home or homeland. Two years later, Jones emphasized pedagogical and political efficacy as a valuable reason for the move: “Let’s face it. The world identifies San Francisco with white gay men, but AIDS is doing its worst in women of color. The directors decided, correctly, that Atlanta would be the proper place from which to continue to get the word out.”\textsuperscript{39} Recognizing the reductive significations of places, Jones nevertheless affirms the value of place and the value of thinking in terms of the careful integration of people, texts, and places. This affirmation of the pedagogical and political significance of Atlanta to women of color seems to run counter to his earlier effort to attenuate the link among San Francisco, gay men, and the Quilt, but these claims do not rise to the level of contradiction. That is, a claim about the Quilt’s inability to settle definitively into a specific homeland because of its promiscuous mobility does not contradict a call for rhetorical sensitivity.
Especially notable here is Jones’s unequivocal recognition of women of color as the most vulnerable population for HIV transmission. This is not just an epidemiological claim; it is also a political claim in that it warrants a targeted investment of resources.

And Back Again?

As a second and related controversy involving mobilities, the firing of Cleve Jones from his paid role as spokesperson for the Quilt took a decidedly more circuitous route. Twisting and turning from a denied request to a call for firing to a lawsuit, and through several settlements, each of which unsettled the previous, this controversy was decidedly complicated. In this controversy, mobility figured in two important ways: the need for Quilt panels to circulate promiscuously in order to optimize their good works, and the effort to return the Quilt to its San Francisco place of origin.

In anticipation of the November 2004 national elections, Cleve Jones hoped to conduct a voter registration drive for people who are HIV-positive and to underscore gay rights issues by launching a national tour that would culminate in a display of the full Quilt on the National Mall, a display last accomplished in 1996. Jones shared his plan with the board of directors in the summer of 2003, and by several accounts he was told that by November 15, 2003, he would have to raise $2 million to fund the display. Perceiving such a task as unnecessarily cumbersome, Jones submitted a letter to the fifteen-member board of directors in which he outlined complaints against board president Julia Rhoad and board member Edward Gatta and requested greater decision-making authority in his role as spokesperson. Jones failed to raise $2 million by the deadline, and the board of directors decided not to support the national display. More, on December 31, 2003, the board fired Jones for insubordination.

Jones responded vigorously, filing a lawsuit on January 20, 2004, in which he claimed wrongful firing, breach of contract, and intentional emotional distress and asked for financial compensation, retention of his health benefits, which for years had made his expensive anti-HIV medications affordable, and, perhaps most dramatically, the return of
the entire Quilt (with its more than 44,000 panels at the time) to San Francisco. In the spring of 2005, Superior Court judges in California permitted only the mental distress charge to move forward in the lawsuit. By September 2005, the litigants’ lawyers proposed a settlement that would grant Jones the freedom to create a nonprofit “friends of the Quilt” organization affiliated with the NAMES Project, the opportunity to forward four nominations for NAMES Project board members, and receipt of thirty-five blocks of panels to be returned to San Francisco and governed by Jones’s organization in exchange for Jones’s willingness to drop the lawsuit. The next month, the settlement was derailed. In December 2005, a new settlement was proposed, only to be derailed over one year later.42

Given his conscientious defense of the Quilt’s move to Atlanta in 2001 and given the economic, symbolic, and emotional immensity of that move, it is perhaps startling to hear Jones demand the full return of the Quilt to San Francisco. Although Jones eventually agreed to settle for the return of thirty-five of the over 5,700 blocks of panels, this significant reduction does not similarly diminish the significance of his call for the return of the Quilt to its birthplace. In Jones’s view, because the NAMES Project abdicated its responsibility to optimally circulate the Quilt (in the form of, for example, his proposed 2004 national display), it abdicated the privilege of shepherding the Quilt. Further, this abdication reactivated San Francisco’s special link to the Quilt and nominated San Francisco as the proper (re)new(ed) homeland. In December 2005, Jones contended “the Names Project continues to keep the quilt locked up in a warehouse in Atlanta where no one from San Francisco has any access to it at all,” a boldly hyperbolic claim that nevertheless indicts the national office for breaking an implied promise to the previous keepers of the Quilt. In the midst of his lawsuit and settlements, Jones revised his gentle disavowal of a sacred connection between the Quilt and San Francisco into a commitment to his queer homeland, noting, for example, the disproportionate contributions of “thousands and thousands of quilt panels . . . from San Francisco made by San Franciscans,” and explaining, “I fought hard to get the entire quilt back because I believe strongly that the quilt, like the rainbow flag, like the Gay Games, could only have started in San Francisco.”43

Jones’s mission statement for his new organization offered a vigorously partisan account of his relations with the NAMES Project and
featured particular qualities of mobility. Accusing the national office of “years [of] neglect . . . to support the education and activist activities associated with the original mission of the Quilt when it began in San Francisco” and declaring that he was victorious in his lawsuit against the NAMES Project, Jones hailed the work to be done: “to begin anew the educational and memorial mission of the Quilt in the San Francisco Bay Area.” Framed as a recovery of the original mission of the Quilt as conceived in San Francisco, Jones’s new mission was “to demonstrate the continuing need for AIDS education and awareness by means of displaying memorial panels of persons who have died of HIV.”44 Astute observers will recognize in Jones’s call to recover the original mission of the Quilt a tension that seems to rise to the level of contradiction: why condemn straying too far from original commitments after endorsing in 2001 the need to retool the Quilt to meet the needs of the newest disproportionately affected populations? Jones mitigated this seeming contradiction by affirming the premise that disparately affected populations need to be targeted through the Quilt but devoting himself to youth and young people as the constituency to which the Quilt most needs to be retooled.

While Jones did not name young people in the San Francisco Bay Area Friends mission statement, he frequently discussed the needs of young people in his 2000 memoir, emphasized youth in January 2004 as soon as he announced his lawsuit, and iterated youth in September 2005: “if you look at new infection rates, you see a vast majority of newly infected are young people.”45 Keenly, Jones did not argue that educators and activists should shift their focus away from the needs of women of color. Indeed, many of the young who are newly infected are people of color, so a retooling of the Quilt to focus on youth would ostensibly serve communities of color. Instead, with the return of the Quilt to San Francisco as his starting point, Jones fulfilled his rhetorical precedent of naming a population other than gay men to maintain the coherence of his endorsement of retooling the Quilt. Yet in his public statements, Jones failed to distinguish San Francisco as an exceptional site of youth populations; that is, he did not argue that San Francisco had a significantly higher population of youth than Atlanta or other cities in the United States or that San Francisco had recently experienced a significant rise in the numbers of its youth population, nor did he argue that San Francisco was a
recognized homeland for youth politics. As such, Jones abstained from the earlier rhetorical precedent of expressing a unique linkage between place and people to defend moving the Quilt.

More, Jones’s advocacy on behalf of youth simply iterated the NAMES Project’s ongoing focus on youth through its National Youth Education Program. Beginning in the late 1990s, this program’s description named young people as “the fastest growing group in the United States to be infected with HIV” and dedicated itself particularly to “youth of color, young women, and GLBT youth in under-served urban and rural communities.”46 For the NAMES Project, then, youth was not a desperate, disparately infected population that the organization had neglected. While Jones did not accuse the organization of such neglect, his own post-2004 lawsuit emphasis on youth startled with its redundancy.

Conclusions

Thus far, I have interrogated the various ideologies of mobility at play in the controversies over the Quilt’s move to Atlanta and Cleve Jones’s dismissal from the NAMES Project. I have affirmed the value of thinking through these controversies with special attention to themes of home and homeland and to relations between place and movement. In doing so, I have also affirmed that claims about home and homelands are both powerful and complicated. Specifically, I have attended to the challenges of endorsing both promiscuous mobility and habitation in a proper homeland. I have argued that Jones successfully negotiated this challenge in his defense of the Quilt’s move from San Francisco to Atlanta, but that after his dismissal he abstained from his rhetorical precedent in failing to articulate a unique relationship between youth and San Francisco. Following are some of the implications of my choices and findings.

First, my choice to characterize the AIDS Quilt through the concept of “promiscuous mobility” should make sense on two levels. On one hand, I advance the concept earnestly as an especially apt way of expressing how the Quilt’s advocates think about its ends and means. On the other hand, I advance the concept with some irony, heartened and inspired by its erotic and immodest dimensions. In his original vision of the Quilt,
Cleve Jones was explicit about his desire to capitalize on the presumed capacity of the medium of quilting to dismantle the stigma of gay male promiscuity: “That it was women who did the sewing was an important element. At the time, HIV was seen as the product of aggressive gay male sexuality, and it seemed that the homey image and familial associations of a warm quilt would counter that.”

Douglas Crimp and others have famously criticized this temperate motivation given that sex—indeed, promiscuity—occupied a key material and symbolic place for some in the process of queer “liberation.” My choice, then, should be read as an expression of agreement with Crimp’s and others’ critiques.

Second, I want to insist on the value of imagining that a San Francisco homeland for the Quilt was neither inevitable nor necessary and that San Francisco was not a singularly appropriate place for the Quilt to have domestically emerged. Indeed, if we consider other constituencies disproportionately affected by HIV in the earliest years of the U.S. epidemic—hemophiliacs, female sex workers, and intravenous drug users, for example—we might profitably wonder where the Quilt might have originated had those constituencies created it—Peoria? Nevada? New York City? My point here is to note that while the Quilt’s emergence in San Francisco was not random, neither was it inevitable.

Third, in terms of explicit multiplication and targeting of audiences, the “retooling” or “reinvention” of the Quilt preceded by several years its relocation. By the mid-1990s, for example, the NAMES Foundation had, with Cleve Jones’s enthusiastic endorsement, established its National Interfaith Program and National High School Quilt Program. Further, in 1999 the organization created the Historically Black Colleges and Universities Initiative to target young people of color. Thus, the Quilt’s relocation to Atlanta did not occasion a sudden or unprecedented rethinking of its potential good works. Still, for someone who views the relocation of the Quilt from its ostensible queer homeland as an index of a related reconfiguration or detachment of the Quilt from queer histories and queer politics, the following NAMES Project description of its ongoing efforts to archive each of its panels might evoke anxiety about the ideological distance traveled in the Quilt’s relocation: once archiving is completed, “a student in the rural South exploring her heritage might search for all
the panels that contain kente cloth, read about the memorialized persons’ lives, and access video interviews with the panel makers to learn about the significance of the African patterns.” To turn a ghastly phrase, the artifact imagined here is not your dead gay white uncle’s Quilt.

Fourth (and related), strange fears about being shut out from the Quilt upon its move to Atlanta express an underlying commitment to homeland and betray anxiety about the loss of one of its artifacts. Upon announcement of the relocation, one activist wondered: “The majority of the panels were made here in San Francisco. How am I going to be able to go and view the panels I have made?” As I noted above, in 2005 Jones claimed that the NAMES Project had “locked up” the Quilt in a warehouse, where “no one from San Francisco has any access to it at all.” In a similar vein, a June 2006 Los Angeles Times article bookends its discussion of the Quilt’s obscurity with evocations of the quiet, cold, secluded warehouse in Atlanta. Factually, the relocation of Quilt panels to Atlanta does not make them unavailable to residents of San Francisco. At various levels of financial ability, those residents can travel to Atlanta to see panels, travel to nearby local displays, or request panels (indeed, very specific panels) for their own local displays. Certainly, those who fear being shut out from the Quilt know this. Yet anxious expressions like these perform the work of affirming the value of the mundane—of the value of being able to encounter a revered artifact on a daily, local, and embodied basis.

Fifth, even as we affirm the special significance of specific places to specific constituencies, we must attend to plurality within those places. Places are inhabited by more than one type of person, and individuals’ claims of identity and place affiliations are rarely singular. This complicated fact should, I hope, temper efforts to claim ownership of the Quilt and its meanings. This fact thus suggests that it is worth the effort to imagine the Quilt’s openness to multiple constituencies and its ability to foster coalitional politics. The “painful progress” of building coalitions sometimes requires a willingness to countenance or create a “revision in the text,” a willingness to recognize seemingly enduring and intractable stories about origins and trajectories as stories that are subject to change. In that spirit, I end with two evocations.
From San Francisco to Atlanta traveled the Quilt panel that Eddie and others crafted for Michael Lee Tiffany. Eddie’s description of his experiences and emotions helping to create the panel and directing its various travels bear witness to the complicated and contradictory pulls of home, homeland, travel, and textual transformation. Expressing a strong sense of connection between the AIDS Quilt and San Francisco as its queer homeland, Eddie laments the NAMES Project’s departure: “It’s unfortunate. Given the devastation in this region, it seems appropriate for the Quilt to be here, even a few panels.” Further, Eddie fondly remembers the days when one could walk down Market Street to the Bay Area chapter office, where newly completed panels were taken in and processed, opining about this ritual that he “would prefer to do it here where [Michael’s panel] could have been in communion with other panels” crafted for and by members of the local San Francisco community. Yet despite voicing these keenly felt emotions about the Quilt and its home(land), Eddie was prepared to relinquish complete ownership of Michael’s panel to Irma (“I was prepared for her to want to keep the panel”), an act that, while honoring the wishes of a biological family member, would have chastened the panel’s promiscuous circulation back to Michael’s chosen home and fictive kin, back to the nation’s ostensible queer homeland, on to the Quilt’s new home, and to not-yet-determined destinations beyond. More, in settling upon the sentiment “as long as it has a home,” Eddie expresses willingness to relinquish the Quilt in toto to a new home.

In the fall of 2006, a sabbatical leave afforded me the opportunity to drive across much of the United States. Curious about potential convergences between my travels and the AIDS Quilt’s mobilities, I discovered via the NAMES Project online display schedule that two blocks of the Quilt would appear at the annual gospel brunch fund-raiser for the Women at Risk (WAR) organization, held at the House of Blues in Los Angeles during my planned stay there. In 1991 Ann Copeland and Linda Luschei founded WAR after being diagnosed with HIV and discovering meager and alienating services for seropositive women in the LA area. During an interview with WAR event coordinator Suzy Herbert before the gospel brunch fund-raiser, she clarified that the Quilt blocks would appear not as the event centerpiece but as a literal “backdrop,” to be hung at the back of the stage, for the day’s events. In Suzy’s description, the Quilt blocks would offer constant, quiet commentary—a reminder of the purpose of the fund-raiser, a reminder that
lives are still being lost, a reminder of the people who have come before us, a public voicing of the people named in the panels on display, a symbol of the need to create safe spaces for seropositive women—as speakers declared and musicians performed on stage. Poignantly, while both cofounders have Quilt panels made in their names, and while Suzy Herbert requested both panels for the fund-raiser event, only the block containing Linda Luschei’s panel was available. This point underscores the fact that the Quilt’s circulation is chastened by a variety of factors, including the possibility that a block containing a desired panel for display might already be temporarily routed elsewhere.

After the event, I essayed to get a closer look at Linda Luschei’s panel. Warned by House of Blues technicians to be careful about the electrical cords, I was permitted onto the stage. At this range and in a particular sense, I met Linda Luschei, my understanding of her significance to the organization animating the memory enacted by her panel. “It’s amazing to think about the fact that the Quilt travels all around the world,” Suzy said. There on the stage, I considered the domestic but no less evocative voyage of Linda’s panel from a storage warehouse in Atlanta to her LA-area community in the service of the organization that she cofounded.

NOTES

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9. From 1987 to 2010, the United States banned the entry of people who declared themselves to be HIV-positive. Such travelers to the United States could apply for waivers, but the application process was typically cumbersome. This restriction on mobility inspired a boycott against the 1990 International AIDS Conference held in San Francisco and led the international AIDS community to discontinue choosing locations in the United States as host sites for annual international AIDS conferences. In 2009, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Sciences removed HIV from the list of infections and diseases that disqualify people from entering or migrating to the United States. That policy took formal effect on January 4, 2010.


11. Scientific and humanistic scholars alike employ the phrase “promiscuous mobility” to denote unfettered or unregulated circulation. In the biological sciences, the phrase refers to the circulation of molecular elements at a cellular level. In the humanities, scholars employ the phrase variously—to denote, for example, the circulation of historical images and citations or the diffusion of queer sexual pleasure.
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13. I met Eddie Hosey, a self-identified gay man and nearly twenty-year resident of San Francisco, through a mutual friend, John Milton Hendricks. John explained Eddie’s participation in the creation of a Quilt panel and his display of the panel at their shared workplace of the library of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit. In San Francisco, I interviewed Eddie on September 21, 2006, and engaged in several follow-up e-mail exchanges with him about his relationship to the panel and its honoree, Michael Lee Tiffany.

14. Throughout, I vary (and by varying, play with) attributions of agency to the Quilt. That is, I have the Quilt searching for a homeland, traveling, and exhibiting restlessness, as well as being sent, being relocated, and being displayed. I mean for this ambivalence to be productive by capturing the Quilt’s dual status as an object and subject of ideology and by demonstrating that mobility, while it can mean many different things, rarely means just one of them. I thank Erin Rand for drawing attention to the productive possibilities of ambivalent attributions of agency.


Dorsey, To Build Our Lives Together, 2.


Arnold Fleischmann and Jason Hardman, “Hitting Below the Bible Belt: The Development of the Gay Rights Movement in Atlanta,” Journal of Urban Affairs 26 (2004): 414. In discussing non-heterosexualities in Atlanta, I have altered my language from “queer people” to “gay and lesbian people” to follow the findings of the Black Pride Survey 2000 of the Policy Institute of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, which found “Black GLBT people do not readily, or even remotely, identify as ‘queer.’” Indeed, in that survey, which included respondents from the 2000 Atlanta Black Pride event, only 1 percent of the 2,408 respondents to the question of sexual identity labels chose “queer” as their preferred self-identification, while 42 percent of those surveyed identified as “gay” and 24 percent identified as “lesbian.” To be sure, the phrase “gay and lesbian people” itself elides other forms of sexual self-identification among black people (e.g., “bisexual” and “same gender loving”). My main point here is to recognize that “queer” does not always function as an umbrella term for all nonnormative sexualities. See Juan Battle, Cathy J.
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30. Fleischmann and Hardman, “Hitting Below the Bible Belt,” 423.


32. The NAMES Project Foundation, “Quilt Relocation Facts,” http://www.aidsquilt.org/pr/pr_archive/pr_farewell_relocation_fact.htm (accessed August 23, 2006). The Quilt itself traveled to Atlanta, while the administrative office was meant to relocate to Washington, D.C., in order to facilitate relations and collaborations with private and governmental institutions located in the nation’s capital. In fact, the administrative office never made it to D.C., instead following the Quilt to Atlanta. Washington, D.C., barely registers as a place or home or potential homeland in the controversies that I examine; thus, I do not address it here.


34. This relocation of the Quilt, its corollary retooling, and the corollary reorganization of formal and financial relations between national and local chapters were followed by the closure of many local chapters. For over a year after the Quilt left San Francisco, the local Bay Area chapter remained open to receive and process new panels created by Bay Area residents and to send those panels to the Atlanta office. Yet in May 2002, the Bay Area chapter announced that it was folding, citing a lack of volunteers, changes in national rules for chapters, and high rents in San Francisco. Before the doors closed in July 2002, Bay Area residents could witness firsthand for the last time panels on local display at an official NAMES Project site. See Christopher Heredia, “Rip in the Quilt—Bay Area Chapter of the NAMES Project Reluctantly Ends an Era of Activism,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 30, 2002, http://ww4.aegis.org/news/sc/2002/SC020731.html (accessed August 26, 2006). A 2002 *Advocate* article situates the Bay Area chapter closure within a larger trend of chapter closures, allegedly catalyzed by the national organization’s newly coercive funding scheme and its apportionment of too many funds for international events. Local chapters of the NAMES Project facilitate memorialization of those proximate to the chapters and facilitate the integration of new, locally produced panels into the larger national artifact and broader HIV/AIDS community. As such, closures of local chapters might profitably be thought of in terms of


36. Heredia, “A Rip in the Quilt” and “AIDS Quilt to be Stored in Atlanta.”


38. Szymanski, “SF Bids Farewell.”

39. See Wiley, “AIDS Quilt Out of Spotlight.” At about the same time, Mike Smith, a cofounder of the NAMES Project, defends the move in pedagogical and political terms: “The quilt never belonged to any one community. . . . Some chapters have felt like it was owned by the gay and lesbian community, but the quilt needs to be going where the epidemic is going—black communities, black churches.” See Heredia, “A Rip in the Quilt.”

40. The board of directors named both a lack of funds and discomfort with associating the Quilt with a federal political campaign as reasons for rejecting Cleve Jones’s plan. It is unclear if Jones was made aware of the second reason before gaining approval to raise money for the 2004 national display. See Lance Williams, “AIDS Quilt Caught Up in Tempest,” San Francisco Chronicle, January 21, 2004, http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2004/01/21/MNG6Q4EAE51.DTL&hw=aids+quilt&sn=010&sc=382 (accessed August 26, 2006).

41. Cleve Jones was not the executive director of the NAMES Project when he was fired. Jones conceived of the Quilt in 1985, incorporated the NAMES Project in 1987, and served as its founder and director until 1990, when he became very ill from AIDS-related complications and ceded his leadership position. Rejuvenated by favorable reactions to anti-HIV drugs, Jones returned to the organization under the title of “founder.” It was from this position that he was fired.

42. Andrew Keegan, “AIDS Quilt Lawsuit Settlement Unravels,” Washington Blade, November 21, 2005, http://washblade.com/ (accessed December 5, 2006). Under the December 2005 terms, Jones founded and directed the San Francisco Bay Area Friends of the AIDS Memorial Quilt, a nonprofit organization sponsored by the progressive Tides Center in San Francisco. Believing that he had fulfilled the legal stipulation that he secure funds to pay for the Atlanta–San Francisco shipment of
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the thirty-five blocks, attain storage for the blocks, and create a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization to steward the blocks by a December 31, 2006, deadline. Jones was dismayed to encounter in early January 2007 the NAMES Project's charge that his nonprofit organization did not technically qualify as an independent 501(c)3 because it benefited from the Tides Center's facilities and financial and managerial support services. Jones's failure, the NAMES Project charged, disobliged the latter from abiding by any of the terms of the settlement, including the return of the thirty-five blocks. After January 2007, there seems to be little media coverage of the conflict between Cleve Jones and the NAMES Project, suggesting that the thirty-five blocks never returned to San Francisco. See Matthew S. Bajko, “Names Project Delivers New Setback to AIDS Quilt Creator,” Bay Area Reporter, January 4, 2007, http://www.ebar.com/ (accessed April 14, 2009); and Wyatt Buchanan, “AIDS Quilt’s Permanent Return to City in Doubt: Portion of Project Destined for S.F. Still Entangled in Legal Battle,” San Francisco Chronicle, January 4, 2007, http://www.sfgate.com/ (accessed April 14, 2009). Details from these two news stories suggest that while the NAMES Project had legal grounding for its objection, it showed no interest in tempering legal proceduralism with affective substance.


44. San Francisco Bay Area Friends of the AIDS Memorial Quilt, “Project Detail,” Tides Center, http://www2.tidescenter.org/directory/project_detail_new.cfm?id=60287.0 (accessed December 5, 2006).


47. Jones, Stitching a Revolution, 108.


51. Bajko, “AIDS Quilt Settlement.”
55. With both Suzy Herbert and Eddie Hosey, I shared the portions of this essay in which they appear and invited their critique and requests for revisions.