Remembering the AIDS Quilt

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Repeated Remembrance:
Commemorating the AIDS Quilt and Resuscitating the Mourned Subject

Erin J. Rand

The NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt celebrated its twentieth anniversary in 2007. Marking this occasion is undoubtedly bittersweet, perhaps inspirational or humbling, but also rather troubling. Commemorating the Quilt recognizes the many thousands of people who have been lost to AIDS and testifies to the power of individual efforts to come together as a community in times of staggering loss and sadness. The trouble of the anniversary of the Quilt, however, emerges from the fact that the Quilt itself is already a project of remembering and memorializing. What does it mean, then, to commemorate a memorial? If those included in the Quilt have already been named and remembered, what incites us now to name and remember the means of their memorial? This doubled commemoration—the remembering of a project designed to remember—leads me to two questions. First, it prompts an investigation of the apparent compulsion to commemorate: what effects—in terms of the nation’s relationship to AIDS and homosexuality, as well as
the subject positions afforded to gay men—are produced by this repeated remembrance? Second, by situating the Quilt within the realm of memorials, to what extent are the potential political interventions of the Quilt disarticulated from discourses of activism and opposition?

The first of these questions suggests that the repeated ritual of memorializing those who have died of AIDS (and the Quilt that marks these deaths) serves to maintain a particular “mourned subject” position. Arising from the nation’s ambivalent reaction to gay men in the late 1980s—shock and grief mounting apace with homophobia—the mourned subject is the subject position through which gay men were incorporated into the national imaginary during the early years of the AIDS crisis. Considering both the social and psychic mechanisms through which this subject position was created, this position enables social recognition and at least a tenuous sort of tolerance; ultimately, however, it radically circumscribes the agency of the subject constituted as such. With respect to the second question, and as an alternative to the limitations of the mourned subject position, the Quilt must also be situated in relation to activist discourses. That is, as both a memorial and an activist project—or more accurately, activism in the form of a memorial—the Quilt participates in a larger conversation regarding the roles of mourning and grief versus militancy and anger in AIDS activism. Thus, when the Quilt’s activism is taken seriously and its rhetorical force considered in terms of the activist agency it enables, the mourned subject position it produces is revealed not only as being conservative in the sense that it maintains a particular kind of oppressive subjection, but also as actually preventing legitimate mourning of the dead.

Importantly, the mourned subject position is not self-fashioned by those who occupy it, but becomes intelligible and inhabitable through national discourses about AIDS and homosexuality. The Quilt, therefore, also must be considered as a public memorial or site of ritualized mourning, since it participates in shaping national sentiment and public memory, and in working out the nation’s relationship to the AIDS crisis. As studies of public memory tend to emphasize, the presumption of shared values and identity of the “nation” is rhetorically built, in part, through the construction and consumption of public memorials. Blair, Jeppeson, and Pucci, for example, argue that in addition to their more
obvious epideictic function, public memorials also work politically or de-
liberatively, acting as “registers of present and future political concern,”
and instructing visitors in national values.¹ Similarly, Barbara Biesecker
suggests that reconstructions of the past play an important role in (re)
crafting a sense of national identity or belonging: “what we remember and
how we remember it can tell us something significant about who we are
as a people now, about the contemporary social and political issues that
divide us, and about who we may become.” For Biesecker, the popular
texts through which public memory functions do not simply reflect na-
tional values, but also work persuasively as “civics lessons” that instruct
citizens in particular understandings of and relationships to the nation.²
When public memory is thus understood to be rhetorical, the contested
nature of any memorial object or event is highlighted. As Stephen Browne
points out, not only do public memories often result from processes of
struggle and contention, but they also serve as resolutions to perceived
national problems. That is, commemorations can alleviate the national
anxieties that emerge from demographic and historical change.³ Marita
Sturken argues that it is through cultural memory texts such as the Quilt
that “definitions of the nation and ‘Americanness’ are simultaneously
established, questioned, and refigured.” The Quilt’s form, she contends,
“evokes a sense of Americana, yet it also represents those who have been
symbolically excluded from America—drug users, blacks, Latinos, gay
men.” Sturken goes on to explain that the tensions woven through the
Quilt intersect with “contemporary battles over identity politics and po-
litical correctness,” and that they raise questions about difference, in-
clusion/exclusion, and who is able to speak about particular memories.⁴ As a
public memorial that negotiates national identities and national struggles,
the Quilt most certainly is situated within a matrix of discourses that, as
Sturken observes, have consistently troubled the American public. One
of the Quilt’s most significant rhetorical effects for the nation, then, is
the stitching together of the national identity and values whose integrity
have been threatened by these conflicting discourses of homosexuality,
disease, drug use, race, and poverty.

However, as a memorial to those who have died of AIDS, the Quilt
is significantly different than memorials that commemorate, for example,
the veterans of World War II or Vietnam, or the victims of the 9/11 attacks.
Specifically, by remembering those who have died, the Quilt also reminds us that many more continue to die; unlike veterans’ or 9/11 memorials, the Quilt is still expanding, and those living today may yet have their names added to the list of AIDS-related deaths. Therefore, the Quilt is always an incomplete memorial, marking not the end of the epidemic, but its perpetual presence. Remembering those who have died of AIDS certainly involves a construction of the past, but it also necessarily entails particular understandings of the present and of those who remain alive. In other words, while the Quilt clearly does important work for the nation—by providing a site for ritualized mourning and absolution—it also directly affects (indeed effects) the living by producing a subject position through which certain people are able to be socially recognized and to act.

In what follows, the Quilt, as a public memorial, is understood to participate significantly in discourses of national identity; however, focusing primarily on the construction of the mourned subject position—especially as it relates to AIDS activism—highlights the process of subjectivation, by which subjects are constituted rhetorically through the discourses surrounding the Quilt. That is, the mourned subject position is both produced by and is necessary to the national identity formed in relation to AIDS. The commemoration of the Quilt’s anniversary resuscitates the mourned subject and reinforces the nation’s earlier relationship to AIDS and homosexuality.

As a significant cultural text, the Quilt is a highly recognizable site at which to explore the fraught relationship between mourning and activism during the AIDS crisis. The potential for forging activism from mourning is engaged both theoretically and practically in three key critical interventions. First, in his 1989 essay, “Mourning and Militancy,” Douglas Crimp cautions that activist groups like ACT UP, with their penchant for militancy, lead to a denial of the melancholic incorporation of sexual shame. However, because he is hesitant to embrace activists’ anger and aggression, his use of the Freudian concepts of mourning and melancholia offers only an incomplete account of ego formation during the AIDS crisis. Second, Judith Butler’s examination of the process of subjectivation highlights both the psychic and the social mechanisms of subject formation, suggesting that it is only by radically risking the dissolution of the subject that the terms of subjugation can be resisted or resignified.
Finally, Andrew Sullivan’s 1996 “When Plagues End,” written seven years after Crimp’s essay and at a very different point in the AIDS crisis, attempts to imagine a gay male subject free of his attachment to mourning. Sullivan argues that an embrace of “responsibility” and “life” is the means for changing both gay male subjectivity and a homophobic and AIDS-phobic society; however, the aggressive impulses that Sullivan and Crimp both eschew are crucial to the possibility of resubjectivation. That is, the militant AIDS activism that emerged in the late 1980s may have been a means of both responding to oppressive social conditions and shifting the terms of subjectivity available to gay men.

The possibilities for transformation available through risking the subject may be glimpsed in the political funerals of ACT UP and a 1989 protest in Montreal. Unlike the mourned subject position afforded by the Quilt, militant activist practices like these may actually serve to disrupt the terms of subjection and create the condition of possibility for both mourning and resubjectivation.

Activism through Mourning: The Beginnings of the Quilt

When President Ronald Reagan addressed the opening ceremonies of the Third International Conference on AIDS on May 31, 1987, he publicly uttered the word “AIDS” for the first time. Having blatantly ignored the AIDS epidemic for six years after the HIV virus had been identified, Reagan finally acknowledged it only to suggest the implementation of repressive and discriminatory testing procedures. By the time Reagan delivered this speech, over 40,000 Americans had already died from AIDS, a vastly disproportionate number of whom were gay men. Of course, Reagan’s lack of attention is only one instance of the overwhelmingly callous and homophobic attitude that characterized the nation’s response to the AIDS epidemic. Though the pervasive homophobia and systemic neglect of the federal government, drug companies, and medical institutions is by now well documented, its significance to the activist practices of the gay men who continued to live through the AIDS crisis cannot be underestimated. As Douglas Crimp suggests, “there is an all but inevitable
connection between the memories and hopes associated with our lost
friends and the daily assaults on our consciousness. Seldom has a society
so savaged people during their hour of loss.”

It is not surprising, then, that some of the earliest AIDS activism fo-
cused on providing a dignified and public forum for mourning the deaths
of the men whose disease was often understood to be synonymous with—
or worse, justified by—their sexuality and therefore viewed with revulsion
and hatred. The NAMES Project Memorial Quilt was formally organized
by Cleve Jones in June 1987 in order to counter the anonymity and secrecy
that surrounded AIDS deaths by specifically naming—and by naming,
providing a means for mourning—the dead. Only two months later, the
Quilt already contained almost two thousand panels and was displayed
on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. By 1992 it included over 21,000
panels, and today it has expanded to over 47,000 panels. Not only did the
Quilt serve as a memorial to the dead and a site for ritual mourning, but it
also provided an opportunity for protesting the nation’s mismanagement
of the AIDS epidemic and rallying for more research and support. In fact,
as Jones maintains, the Quilt specifically was intended to confront the
nation’s apathy: “The Quilt was and is an activist symbol—comforting,
yes, but mortally troubling. If it raised a single question, it was, What are
we going to do about it? That was the challenge we laid at the national
doorstep.” However, the kind of activism that was made possible through
the Quilt—an activism based on mourning—existed simultaneously, and
sometimes in tension with, another activist reaction to the rapidly in-
creasing number of dying gay men: to be enraged rather than saddened,
to fight instead of grieve. For instance, the group of activists who founded
the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) in March of 1987 in
New York City sought to put their anger and frustration to use through
confrontational protests and “zaps.” Calling themselves “a diverse, non-
partisan group united in anger and committed to direct action to end the
AIDS crisis,” ACT UP enacted loud, visible demonstrations primarily at
the local level and often utilized bold, eye-catching graphics (such as the
“Silence = Death” emblem) to attract attention.

Both of these activist responses to the AIDS crisis rely upon a certain
communal relationship to mourning, either by providing an outlet for
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sadness or by converting the pain of loss into militancy. The process of mourning for gay men in the late 1980s and early 1990s was not simply a reaction to the loss of the lives of their friends and their lovers—and to the potential loss of their own; it actually functioned in the formation of particular activist subject positions.\(^\text{10}\) Furthermore, as the nation mourned—even if diffidently—for a population toward which it was decisively ambivalent, gay men found themselves being accorded, at the moment of their deaths, a dubious acceptance and social recognition.\(^\text{11}\)

**Mourning or Militancy?**

As AIDS claimed more and more lives, rituals of mourning—candlelight vigils, the Quilt, funerals, and private ceremonies of remembrance—became common fixtures of gay communities. The tension between the need to mourn for lost friends and lovers and the need to organize forceful protests against the political and medical institutions that did not prevent their deaths thus became increasingly significant throughout the 1980s. Some activists, such as the vituperative Larry Kramer, were alarmed by the quiescence these events seemed to condone. In his characteristic polemic style, he goads his fellow gay men: “You are going to die and you are going to die very soon. Unless you get off your fucking tushies and fight back. Unless you do, you will forgive me, you deserve to die.”\(^\text{12}\) While candlelight vigils often provided a means for gay men to unite as a community in their mourning, AIDS activist leaders such as Roger McFarland worried that they did not move their attendees to participate in more politically oriented actions. Speaking at a vigil, McFarland explains his own turn from sadness to anger:

I never want to forget my pain, or what my friends endured. I embraced that pain, I took it to heart, and I use it to feed the bilious rage that has taken root in my soul. I know I would lose my mind, if not my life, if all these people we love so much ended up dying for nothing but the ineptitude of a racist, sexist, classist, homophobic political regime and an apathetic public. That’s why I fight instead of cry.\(^\text{13}\)
Shifting the focus from mourning to anger, and engaging in actions aimed at social transformation rather than demonstrations of grief, activist organizations such as ACT UP hoped to replace feelings of devastation and fatalism with rage and courage.14

Reacting to the tendency for gay activism to be dominated and defined by these calls to anger, Crimp suggests that gay men must also find a way to incorporate mourning into their activism. In his now seminal essay “Mourning and Militancy,” Crimp describes the rising suspicion with which mourning is met in the gay community. The violence wreaked by the AIDS virus, Crimp explains, demands a vindication of the dead: it is not only through death that people are brutalized, but also through the widespread homophobia that prevents their friends and lovers from properly remembering and grieving for them. In the face of this violence, mourning therefore becomes militancy.15 However, drawing on Freud’s distinction between mourning and melancholia, Crimp suggests that this militancy may operate as a form of denial and come at great psychic cost to gay men.

According to Freud, mourning is a normal process of reacting to the loss of a loved person or ideal. Melancholia, on the other hand, is a pathological state of dejection, inability to love, self-reproach, and lowered self-esteem. Freud notes that most of the features of melancholia are also present in extreme grief; mourning and melancholia therefore appear to be analogous, and the process of normal mourning can be used to understand the mechanisms of melancholia. The work of mourning involves the withdrawal of the libido from the lost object. This process is always a struggle that can only be carried out gradually over time, but once the libido has been detached from each memory of the lost object, “the ego becomes free and uninhibited again.” While the similarities between mourning and melancholia would suggest that melancholia also involves the loss of a loved object, Freud explains that the melancholiac’s loss is “one in himself.” The loved object is internalized, or transferred onto the individual’s ego; unlike the process of mourning, in which the libido is withdrawn from the object and eventually shifted to a new object, in the case of melancholia, the libido is “withdrawn into the ego” and “establish[es] an identification of the ego with the abandoned object.” This internalization has the additional effect of constituting the ego, or
the conscience, in its self-reflexive capacity: “in this condition one part of the ego sets itself over against the other, judges it critically, and, as it were, looks upon it as an object.” Whereas the mourners is conscious of her or his loss, the melancholiac is not, or cannot be, conscious of the loss with which she or he identifies and through which her or his ego is constituted.16

Furthermore, when the loved object is turned inward onto an individual’s ego, the criticisms and reproaches directed toward the object then become self-criticisms and self-reproaches of her- or himself. It is through this internalization of ambivalence that Freud explains the tendency in melancholiacs toward low self-esteem and self-reviling. He elaborates, “If the object-love, which cannot be given up, takes refuge in narcissistic identification, while the object itself is abandoned, then hate is expanded upon this new substitute-object, railing at it, depreciating it, making it suffer and deriving sadistic gratification from its suffering.”17 In other words, the self-punishment of melancholia is a means of expressing the ambivalent feelings originally intended for the loved object.

It is through this notion of ambivalence that Crimp makes his argument for the importance of mourning to AIDS activism. He insightfully suggests that the lost object of the gay male community is not only the thousands of actual lives, but also “the ideal of perverse sexual pleasure,” or “a culture of sexual possibility: back rooms, tea rooms, bookstores, movie houses, and baths; the trucks, the pier, the ramble, the dunes.”18 The uninhibited sexuality that is missed, however, is fraught with ambivalence: it was never generally tolerated and is often repudiated by gay men themselves. In other words, the reactions of gay men to the devastation of AIDS are similar to what Freud describes as melancholia. Not only are gay men prevented from consciously mourning the loss of their sexual culture—because of both internal and external prohibitions against that culture—but their feelings of ambivalence toward their own promiscuity are turned inward onto themselves. Crimp argues that this self-imposed misery must be acknowledged along with the obvious misery inflicted by contemporary social conditions: “By making all violence external, pushing it to the outside and objectifying it in “enemy” institutions and individuals, we deny its psychic articulation, deny that we are effected, as well as affected, by it.” The tendency for activists to embrace rage and militancy,
then, may operate as a mechanism of disavowal; rather than facing their own ambivalence toward safe sex and HIV testing, Crimp suggests, their self-criticisms are simply directed outward. Crimp does not deny the importance or validity of the anger of militant activist groups; instead, he calls for an activism that includes mourning: “Militancy, of course, then, but mourning too: mourning and militancy.”

The Melancholic Ego and the Mourned Subject

Crimp’s essay focuses primarily on the melancholic effects of an unacknowledged, ungrievable loss and the internalization of ambivalence toward the loved object. Though he begins to gesture toward the way in which this ambivalence constitutes the self (recall his comment that “we are effected, as well as affected, by it”), he does not explore fully the rhetorical process by which gay men come to be recognized as subjects. His argument that activist militancy represents a form of denial or disavowal rests upon an incomplete account of the subjectivation of gay men during the AIDS crisis. In order to understand the psychic rationale for the turn toward militancy, we must first investigate more fully the constitution of the subject—and its enabling and constraining elements—that might make this turn.

While Crimp rightly identifies the importance of the self-inflicted violence resulting from the inability to grieve a lost gay male sexual culture, he implies that this violence is directed against the ego but does not elaborate the process through which it also constitutes the ego. As Judith Butler explains, the turning inward of the lost object onto the ego presumes the preexistence of the ego, but is also said to produce the ego: “it is unclear that this ego can exist prior to its melancholia. The ‘turn’ that marks the melancholic response to loss appears to initiate the redoubling of the ego as an object; only by turning back on itself does the ego acquire the status of a perceptual object.” According to this account, the ego never has been, nor ever can be, free of melancholia, since melancholic loss is the very condition for the emergence of a self-reflexive subject. Furthermore, since the loss of the loved object is an unconscious loss, it “institutes the ego as a necessary response to or ‘defense’ against loss,” and
must remain unconscious in order to fulfill this function. Thus, when Crimp suggests that gay men need to acknowledge the psychic violence they inflict upon themselves, he does not account for the fact that the ego is premised upon—and therefore remains unconscious of and actually preserves—this violence.

Of course, understanding the subjectivity of gay men during the AIDS crisis cannot be limited to a consideration of the intrapsychic processes of melancholia and ego formation; one must also address the social conditions and particular form of the Quilt that rhetorically constituted a certain subject position. While the gay male community was continually blamed for the transmission of AIDS, and the effects of the disease were assumed at the time to be confined largely to this demographic, the AIDS epidemic nevertheless became an occasion for mourning on a national scale. This is due in no small part not only to the existence of the Quilt as a public memorial, but also to its particular resonance with traditional Americana: by utilizing a symbol of American folk art and mythology—the patchwork quilt—the Quilt was able to encourage nationwide mourning, even if those being mourned continued to be reviled. According to Hawkins, “It was also a brilliant strategy for bringing AIDS not only to public attention but into the mainstream of American myth, for turning what was perceived to be a ‘gay disease’ into a shared national tragedy.” Furthermore, Hawkins suggests that by grouping thousands of individual memorials into a single enormous fabric, especially when it is displayed near other national monuments in Washington, D.C., the Quilt reformulates and contextualizes individual losses as national devastation.

Though the Quilt does position the deaths due to AIDS as a national loss, it does not necessarily redefine the “deaths of gay men” as “deaths of Americans.” That is, while AIDS might be viewed as a tragedy that should be mourned by the nation as a whole, those who have died are still regarded as part of a specific—and marginalized—gay male community. In fact, during the Quilt’s early years, many panels used only partial names, nicknames, or were left blank in order to protect the anonymity of the deceased; being represented on the Quilt was tantamount to being “outed” as a gay man. Noting the divisiveness marked and reinforced through the Quilt, Crimp suggests that it functions, in part, as “the spectacle of mourning, the vast public-relations effort to humanize and dignify our
losses for those who have not shared them." Rather than encouraging a sense of national responsibility for all citizens, Crimp wonders, "Does it provide a form of catharsis, an easing of conscience, for those who have cared and done so little about this great tragedy?" In fact, Americans may be uniquely predisposed to engage in precisely this form of mourning of gay men. Butler suggests that a "culturally prevalent form of melancholia" might be expected to exist when societal regulations strictly prohibit the grieving of a loved object. In this case, the unrecognized and therefore ungrievable loss to which she refers is the "homosexual cathexis," or the possibility of homosexual attachment and love. The spectacle of mourning provided by the Quilt and similar rituals, then, may be a means of performing grief for that unconscious and ungrievable loss that homosexuality represents in America, and therefore of negotiating the tensions that it produces in the imagined national identity.

While Butler's explanation clarifies the way in which such performances of mourning serve the nation (when it is understood to exclude the group for which it mourns), it does not address the effect of this mourning in the constitution of a subject position that gay men themselves are able to occupy. The scholarship on public memory is again useful here, since the Quilt as a memorial helps define the nation's relationship to those who are being remembered and as such also produces them as a particular kind of citizen. As Browne explains, instances of public commemoration not only create an "official" version of history, but also have bearing on "who counts as an American and who does not." Thus, the process by which one becomes intelligible as a citizen is explicitly rhetorical: the ways in which gay men are positioned in discourses surrounding the Quilt is not merely a question of representation, then, but a question of the kinds of agency afforded to particular kinds of subjects. If the gay male community is situated as the cathected object that the nation mourns, it is granted a certain kind of social recognition, and gay men are able to occupy a subject position that is not otherwise available. To put it differently, gay men—codified as a group that is dying of AIDS—become socially recognized subjects by being mourned. This does not mean that they are "subjects who are mourned," which would imply that this subject position existed prior to the mourning process, but that they become "subjects through mourning," or more precisely, "mourned subjects." The
mourned subject can only exist, then, on the condition of a mourning that has the ability to grant validity and subjectivity to those mourned. Clearly, gay men as a group occupied (and continued to occupy) particular subject positions before being positioned as mourned subjects; however, the nation’s (limited) empathy and compassion for gay men during the AIDS crisis led to the production of a gay male subject position that was not defined primarily by perversion and secrecy.

Being constituted as mourned subjects, then, is enabling insofar as it confers visibility, identification, and recognition. When Andrew Sullivan writes about the shift from “fearful stigmatization” to “awkward acceptance” of homosexuality in America, it is the enabling capacities of “mourned subjectivity” that he is identifying. He explains,

AIDS and its onslaught imposed a form of social integration that may never have taken place otherwise. Forced to choose between complete abandonment of the gay subculture and an awkward first encounter, America, for the most part, chose the latter . . . What had once been a strong fear of homosexual difference, disguising a mostly silent awareness of homosexual humanity, became the opposite. The humanity slowly trumped the difference. Death, it turned out, was a powerfully universalizing experience.27

For some gay men during the AIDS crisis, the kind of recognition and even acceptance that being mourned by the nation provided was, at the least, a relief from constant invisibility and hostility. As Crimp concedes, the Quilt “is one of the few efforts of our community that has been generally granted exemption from opprobrium.”28 In fact, as Hawkins demonstrates by juxtaposing the Quilt with the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the untimely, tragic deaths of gay men can even be construed—like the deaths of soldiers—as heroic and especially suited for memorializing.

On the other hand, when they are constituted as mourned subjects, the agency of gay men is significantly constrained, and their potential for activism is severely limited. After all, the range of activities accorded to one who is mourned is essentially restricted to suffering and death. As Steve Abbott contends, the message of the Quilt, which he reads as a “memorial to a dying subculture,” is “We didn’t like you fags and junkies
when you were wild, kinky and having fun. We didn’t like you when you were angry, marching and demanding rights. But now that you’re dying and have joined ‘nicely’ like ‘a family sewing circle,’ we’ll accept you.”

Again, it is significant that the Quilt as a memorial is always necessarily incomplete. As Abbott’s comment illustrates, the Quilt attests to a “dying” subculture rather than to a subculture that is already “dead.” Even those still living, in other words, are being identified by the Quilt as those whom it will name in the future, and their fates, it seems, are inescapable. The subjectivity provided to gay men through mourning, therefore, depends not only on being always already ill or dead, but also on a tenuous acceptance that is maintained only through appropriate behavior. Returning to Butler’s contention that the mourning of AIDS is a performance of the loss denied by a cultural melancholia, it is clear that the nation’s sentiments toward this loss—because it is melancholic—will always be deeply ambivalent. Hence, love will be mixed with hatred, and acceptance tinged with violence. Crimp suggests that along with assuaging the nation’s guilt, then, the Quilt may also provide a means of expressing secret abhorrence: “It would, of course, be unseemly for society to celebrate our deaths openly, but I wonder if the quilt helps make this desire decorous.”

The shackles of the mourned subject position cannot merely be thrown off at will, since the subject cannot act prior to its own constitution, and since it necessarily maintains a psychic attachment to its own subjection. According to Butler, subjection is a paradoxical form of power since it “signifies the process of becoming subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming a subject.” She uses the term “subjectivation” for the French assujettissement to denote “both the becoming of the subject and the process of subjection—one inhabits the figure of autonomy only by becoming subjected to a power, a subjection which implies a radical dependency.” The process of subjectivation, therefore, is marked by the same peculiarity as Freud’s description of the melancholic formation of the ego: the subject that is subordinated to power is also constituted by that power and cannot preexist it. Any agency or possibility of resistance that may be available to the subject, then, must always originate in the power that it is said to resist. The subject always maintains, according to
Butler, a “passionate attachment” to the terms of its subjection, precisely because it relies upon this subjection in order to exist, but must deny its attachment to preserve its apparent autonomy. This does not mean, however, that the subject is doomed to simply replicate the conditions of its own subjection; instead, the power assumed as the agency of the subject may be discontinuous with the power that led to the subject’s formation. As Butler explains, “Where conditions of subordination make possible the assumption of power, the power assumed remains tied to those conditions, but in an ambivalent way; in fact, the power assumed may at once retain and resist that subordination.”

The conservative nature of power in subjectivation arises from the subject’s desire for its own continued existence: the attachment to subjection protects the subject from dissolution. It is for this reason, then, that gay men cannot simply refuse to be mourned subjects; any alteration of subjectivity must have recourse to what Butler calls the “unconscious of power itself.” In other words, the unconscious attachment to subjugation is the condition of possibility for resisting and resignifying the terms of subjection. Attempting to resist necessarily entails the risk of the annihilation of the subject, but it is in this risk that Butler locates the opportunity for the reorganization of subjectivation. She queries, “What would it mean for the subject to desire something other than its continued ‘social existence’? If such an existence cannot be undone without falling into some kind of death, can existence nevertheless be risked, death courted or pursued, in order to expose and open to transformation the hold of social power on the conditions of life’s persistence?” Butler is essentially calling for the necessity of risking desubjectivation in order to create real change in practices of systemic oppression. For gay men engaged in activism during the AIDS crisis, this means placing in jeopardy their subjectivation through mourning in both the psychic and social realms: the formulation of the ego through the melancholic incorporation of their ambivalence toward a lost sexual culture, as well as the social recognition conferred by a nation ready to mourn—for ambivalent reasons of its own—the tragedy of AIDS in the gay male community. That is, theorizing the possibility for desubjectivation requires attention to both the psychic and the social mechanisms through which subjectivity is formed.
Sullivan’s Solution

For the first fifteen years of the AIDS epidemic, the annual number of AIDS deaths relentlessly increased with each year. It was not until 1996, due in large part to the introduction of protease inhibitor drugs, that the death toll was actually lower than the previous year. For the first time, it was possible to imagine AIDS as an illness with which one could live relatively normally, rather than as an inevitable death sentence. In response to this hopeful attitude, Andrew Sullivan wrote his now infamous New York Times Magazine article, “When Plagues End,” which proclaimed the foreseeable end of the epidemic. Sullivan was widely criticized by AIDS activists for discounting the astronomical numbers of people who were still dying of AIDS (after all, there were approximately 47,000 more deaths in the United States in the next three years alone), for ignoring the expense of the new drugs that prohibited many people with AIDS from having access to them, and for imposing moral standards on gay men that denied and sought to undermine the uniqueness of their sexual culture.

Sullivan’s article, in spite of its reprehensible claims, is interesting here because it seems to push toward precisely the kind of desubjectivation of gay men that Butler might suggest, and which might be an alternative to the mourned subject position produced by the Quilt. Sullivan argues that the devastation of AIDS has led to an unprecedented solidarity within the gay community; while this solidarity was necessary during the crisis, he sees gay men clinging to the tragedy of AIDS because they are frightened of the prospect of living without it. He writes, “the solidarity of the plague years is becoming harder and harder to sustain. For the first time, serious resentment is brewing among HIV-positive men about the way in which AIDS has slowly retreated from the forefront of gay politics.” Faced with returning to the “normalcy” of life that does not revolve around AIDS, Sullivan suggests that many gay men feel threatened. Some, “sensing an abatement of the pressure, have returned, almost manically, to unsafe sexual behavior, as if terrified by the thought that they might actually survive, that the plague might end and with it the solidarity that made it endurable.” In short, according to Sullivan, the gay male community is
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fixated on death and dying; it stubbornly refuses to let go of the disease that has nearly decimated it, because it can no longer imagine life without terror and grief. This position clearly resonates with Freud’s description of melancholia: rather than mourning the losses incurred by AIDS, gay men have internalized the loved object. Not only is their ambivalence toward the virus therefore turned upon themselves, but it is also the foundation of their subjectivity; hence, gay men maintain a passionate attachment to the very terms of their deaths and misery.

Sullivan’s answer to this impasse offers an implicit critique of a form of activism, like that of the Quilt, that occurs through the process of grieving for the dead. He suggests instead an embrace of responsibility and the possibilities of life. He contends that the AIDS crisis required gay men to become more responsible for themselves and for one another: “Men who had long since got used to throwing their own lives away were confronted with the possibility that they actually did care about themselves and wanted to survive . . . A culture that had been based in some measure on desire became a culture rooted in strength.” He advocates putting this responsibility to use in shifting the terms of gay male subjectivity, for “gird[ing] yourself . . . for the possibility of life” rather than for the possibility of death.36 In other words, Sullivan exhorts gay men to risk the terms of their subjugation and subjectivity—the all-consuming fight against AIDS, their irresponsible and self-loathing sexual practices, the solidarity that arises among an oppressed and suffering minority group—in order to take up new subject positions that are rooted in self-respect and responsibility, freedom from stigmatization, and survival. Unlike the Quilt, then, which constitutes for gay men a subject position premised on death and mourning, Sullivan envisions a form of subjectivity that intentionally eschews this morbid attachment.

Ultimately, Sullivan is perhaps correct in identifying the unconscious attachment to death and mourning as a basis for gay male subjectivity during the AIDS crisis. However, his solution, though it appears to offer an opportunity for resubjectivation, in fact merely reinforces the terms of gay male subjection in both the psychic and social domains. First, by characterizing pre-AIDS sexual practices as irresponsible and promiscuous, Sullivan contributes to the ambivalence that many gay men feel toward the loss of this sexual culture. As Crimp points out, it is the
inability to grieve for these pleasures—because they are prohibited—that leads to resistance to safe sex: “safe sex may seem less like defiance than resignation, less like accomplished mourning than melancholia.” In other words, Sullivan’s suggestion that gay men renounce their sexual pasts does nothing to move them toward more “responsible” sexual behavior, but actually deepens the ambivalence through which the ego is constituted, thereby effectively strengthening the unconscious attachment to the lost sexual culture. Second, Sullivan’s position is based on the assumption that the AIDS crisis has effected a transformation in the nation’s stigmatization of homosexuality; he claims that this tragedy has led to a newfound empathy for gay men. What he does not acknowledge is that this acceptance is extended only to those willing to occupy the position of the mourned subject: it precludes activities supposedly not suited to the ill or dying, such as expressing anger, fighting homophobia, engaging in activism, and, of course, having gay sex. Far from attempting to modify this subject position, Sullivan encourages gay men to occupy it and implies that a refusal to embrace tolerance in this way amounts to immaturity and irresponsibility.

Thus, I offer this extended reading of Sullivan’s position because he recognizes that what he calls the “possibilit[ies] of life” are simply not available to those whose subjectivity is constituted through mourning. However, Sullivan’s solution, in which gay men are encouraged to embrace life, depends upon the very mourned subject position produced by the Quilt and to which he claims to object. To put this differently, the rhetorical form of activism enacted by the Quilt serves to stitch together the conflicting national sentiments that are wrought by AIDS. That is, the Quilt makes possible a suturing of the wounds that the AIDS crisis inflicts on the identity of the American nation: it allows the mourning and grief for those named by the Quilt panels to cover over the underlying homophobia and neglect that sustained the severity of the epidemic in the early years. And as a consequence of the Quilt’s affirmation of the nation’s apparent tolerance and compassion, the mourned subject position becomes available as a means for gay men to access a previously impossible acceptance. Though Sullivan criticizes the culture of death and mourning that supposedly sustains the gay community during the AIDS crisis, then, his suggestion that gay men embrace the tolerance that
Risking the Subject: Resubjectivation

In the midst of a trenchant critique of Sullivan’s position in “When Plagues End,” Crimp laments, “I sometimes get the claustrophobic feeling that Andrew Sullivan and I inhabit the very same world.”40 The world to which Crimp refers is a relatively privileged one, where he and Sullivan are both able to spend time thinking, writing, and speaking about AIDS, and yet where—in spite of being well-informed and habitual practitioners of safe sex—both have become infected. His cognizance of his privilege, Crimp admits, only adds to the shame attending his sero-conversion. Crimp and Sullivan are caught in a similar bind: though they each strive to transform their world (admittedly with quite different ends in mind), their attempts are continually frustrated by the conservative nature of subjectivity—that is, by the passionate and unconscious attachments that secure one to the terms of one’s subjection because it is only by maintaining these bonds that one has access to a recognizable position as a subject. The fact that Crimp and Sullivan continually find themselves subject to a return to this claustrophobic space suggests that neither has successfully theorized the ego’s severing of its attachment to the terms of its melancholic formulation. Their shared hesitancy to attend to anger and militancy—for Crimp they are a denial of mourning; for Sullivan, a sign of immaturity—indicates, I contend, that it is precisely in these factors that the greatest risk of desubjectivation and the most fertile ground for activism is located.

Similarly, the Quilt, as a project of remembrance, simply cannot enact the anger and aggression that might break this melancholic attachment. This is not to say that particular panels of the Quilt do not speak loudly and vehemently of the rage that the AIDS virus and its mismanagement can elicit. As Cleve Jones argues in response to activists who claim that the Quilt is not angry enough, “Anger is released at the Quilt, it is expressed in the Quilt. Anger can be a great motivator if it’s communicated in a creative way such as in the Quilt; it helps move us on with life and brings us together.”41 For instance, a panel dedicated to Billy
Donald reads, “My anger is, that the government failed to educate us,” while Roger Lyon’s panel states, “I came here today to ask that this nation with all its resources and compassion not let my epitaph read he died of red tape.” And the infamous panel created for the closeted and homophobic Roy Cohn both outs him in death and indicts him in life: “Bully. Coward. Victim.” As eloquently as these panels—and many others like them—may speak of individuals’ feelings of anger and frustration, they do little to change the overall rhetorical force of the Quilt, which, in the form of a memorial on a national scale, deals in discourses of mourning and national identity. In other words, it is through the rhetorical form of the Quilt as a whole, not through the contents of individual panels, that the particular melancholic effects of the Quilt are produced.

The only way for the ego’s attachment to the lost object to be broken, and for conscious mourning to take place, according to Butler, is to marshal the aggression that was internalized when the object was withdrawn into the ego. As she explains, “the aggression instrumentalized by conscience against the ego is precisely what must be reappropriated in the service of the desire to live.” If, as Freud asserts, the ego absorbs the ambivalent feelings—both love and aggression—toward the lost object so as to protect it from hostility, then the aggression that serves as a founding condition for the ego was originally directed outward and was meant for an other. Butler argues that it is only by turning this aggression back onto the loved object and ceasing to shield it that the “melancholic bind” can be fractured: “Survival, not precisely the opposite of melancholia, but what melancholia puts in suspension—requires redirecting rage against the lost other, defiling the sanctity of the dead for the purposes of life, raging against the dead in order not to join them.” Clearly, the prescription for change described here is, if not antithetical to the mission of the Quilt, at least representative of a distinct interruption in the assumption that mourning will move the nation toward compassion and transformation. Furthermore, it is not only the “sanctity of the dead” that is risked by this re-externalization of aggression. Turning outward the aggression that served to consolidate the ego essentially forfeits the melancholic construction of conscience, or, as Butler says, “uncontains’ the ego.” In other words, the re-externalization of aggression is the possibility for resubjectivation, or for the subject, as described earlier, to
“desire something other than its continued ‘social existence.’” Hence, ironically, when Crimp argues that the militancy of AIDS activists is a means of denying internalized violence and protecting themselves from self-inflicted misery, he fails to note the potential for the converse effect. Rather than protecting the subject, the expression of aggression and rage—when the ego is constituted through their incorporation—radically risks the subject.

In fact, some of the militant activist tactics of groups like ACT UP, which focus on channeling internalized aggression and anger onto their proper external objects, might usefully be viewed as a response to the need for transformation of both social conditions and gay male subjectivity. These practices open the possibility for shifting the terms of subjectivation, not only refusing the mourned subject position but also potentially unraveling the psychic bond to melancholia. Furthermore, if the melancholic attachment to the lost gay male sexual culture is broken, it therefore becomes available for mourning. Mourning, as Gregg Horowitz points out, does not entail forgetting or ceasing to care about the object; instead, it separates the self from the object, thereby making the object accessible to memory: “The mourner decathects the psychic traces of the lost object not to forget them, but to detach them from the lost object and thus render them memorable for the very first time. In this way, grieving preserves the intimacy with the lost object . . . despite its being lost to us.”45 Therefore, not only is the gay male community’s ambivalence toward its lost sexual culture ejected from the ego and redirected onto its proper object, but the sexual culture itself can be mourned and remembered, rather than unconsciously preserved through the troublesome attitudes toward safe sex that Sullivan and Crimp discuss. This is not to suggest a particular moral stance regarding the practice of safe sex during the AIDS epidemic but merely to recognize that its equivocal adoption is both performed and described by Sullivan and Crimp as a cause for concern (though, again, for quite different reasons). As Freud tells us, self-imposed violence arises only when violent impulses against an other are redirected against the self; therefore, the self-abasement of the melancholic, in the form of the sexual shame of gay men during the AIDS crisis, is certainly intended for a different target. However, if the aggression that motivates that shame can be re-externalized through
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angry, militant activism, it need not continue to be a founding condition of the ego.

The connection between severing melancholic attachments and activism is not coincidental. As Greg Forter argues, the process of extracting the lost object from the self (and therefore remembering it) has a “political corollary”: “it is only once we can consciously articulate, as fully as possible (though never of course completely), what racism or homophobia or sexism has destroyed that we can build a collective memory of it and seek to do battle in its name.” In other words, the apparent “mourning” that is provided by the Quilt may be more accurately described as melancholic attachment and may, in fact, preclude the possibility for legitimate grief at the loss of thousands of lives and a unique sexual culture. Not only is aggression necessary to free the lost object, then, but its separation allows for an attack against the very systems that prohibited it from being mourned in the first place.

Unstitching the Quilt

The possibilities for mourning the dead need not exclude anger and aggression; indeed, the process of mourning may actually serve as an opportunity for the externalization of aggression that serves to constitute the subject in a new way. To illustrate this process of re-externalizing aggression and fighting political battles, I turn now to two examples of activism—ACT UP’s political funerals and a demonstration at the Fifth International AIDS Conference—that suggest a different relationship between mourning, militancy, and subjectivity.

Part somber processional and part angry demonstration, ACT UP’s political funerals not only provide a space in which grief and rage can coexist, but also alter the terms of subjectivity, effectively refusing the limited recognition provided by the mourned subject position. Political funerals take the ceremonies associated with death—the display of the coffin and possibly the deceased, the funeral procession, the scattering of ashes, the delivery of eulogies—and invest them with the anger and spirit of activism. One of the most jarring elements of political funerals is their publicness: rituals that are usually performed privately are conducted in
places that are not only public but also sites of immense national power. For instance, Steve Michael, founder of the Washington, D.C., chapter of ACT UP, was remembered in 1998 with a political funeral that consisted of a half-mile walk down Pennsylvania Avenue with ACT UP members acting as pallbearers and carrying the group’s trademark signs calling for an end to the government’s neglect of the AIDS crisis. The procession concluded in front of the White House, where Michael’s casket was opened and speakers eulogized Michael and criticized President Clinton for failing to follow through with promises to increase spending to expedite AIDS research. Mark Lowe Fisher, another AIDS activist, in his request that his death be marked with a political funeral, articulates some of the important work that might be done by emphasizing the shame and anger that accompanies grief:

I suspect—I know—my funeral will shock people when it happens. We Americans are terrified of death. Death takes place behind closed doors and is removed from reality, from the living. I want to show the reality of my death, to display my body in public; I want the public to bear witness. We are not just spiraling statistics; we are people who have lives, who have purpose, who have lovers, friends and families. And we are dying of a disease maintained by a degree of criminal neglect so enormous that it amounts to genocide.

I want my death to be as strong a statement as my life continues to be. I want my own funeral to be fierce and defiant, to make the public statement that my death from AIDS is a form of political assassination.

Even as he anticipates his own death, then, Fisher identifies the violence of AIDS as originating in a homophobic culture, and he sacrifices the modicum of respect and recognition that he may receive in his passing. In its place he imagines his political funeral as an opportunity for a new kind of existence, in which death and mourning need not preclude activism, opposition, and social transformation.

While less directly concerned with rituals of mourning, the 1989 demonstration at the Fifth International AIDS Conference in Montreal, which drew several AIDS activist groups (including ACT UP) from Canada and the United States, elegantly exhibits the possibilities for resubjectivation
made possible by risking the subject. Beginning outside the conference center with chants and placards, the demonstration quickly moved inside the building and seized control of the opening plenary itself. Later, when New York City’s health commissioner, Stephen Joseph, proposed nonanonymous HIV testing and aggressive sexual contact tracing—policies that ACT UP firmly opposed—he was drowned out by protesters yelling that he had provided only two hundred clean needles for the city’s 500,000 intravenous drug users. These cries eventually coalesced into a single roar, as protesters literally pointed fingers and shouted repeatedly, “Shame! Shame! Shame!”

It is difficult to judge the effects of this protest on the AIDS policy makers and researchers that it targeted. Once the demonstration ended, the conference presumably proceeded as planned, though hopefully with a heightened awareness of some of the most pressing issues affecting people with AIDS. What is significant about this protest for my purposes, however, is the relationship between the mode of activism and the kind of subjectivity it seems to constitute. The protesters, displaying obvious rage, directly identify and indict Commissioner Joseph as a representative of a homophobic institution. The shaming of Joseph re-externalizes the aggression that had been turned inward in the form of social sanctions against a specifically gay male sexual culture. The protesters mine their own sexual shame for the power through which it constitutes the ego, but redirect it—with pointing fingers to guide the way—onto its rightful object: the social systems that prohibit the expression of (and mourning for) homosexual desire.

The demonstration in Montreal and ACT UP’s political funerals therefore provide a vivid, albeit brief, glimpse of the resubjectivation that might be achieved through aggression. This is, of course, not to say that any individual protest leads to a complete reconstitution of subjectivity; rather, it is to point to a set of practices that offer a possibility—though as yet unfulfilled—of radical transformation of the psychic and social mechanisms through which subjects come to be recognized. Not only does the angry, confrontational activism of these protests create the possibility to mourn the loss of gay male sexual culture, but it also makes available—by radically risking the terms of subjectivation—different forms of gay male subjectivity. That is, by projecting outward aggression and
ambivalence (the internalization of which was the founding condition of the ego), the ego is “uncontained” and therefore available to new terms of psychic and social subjectivation. It is this resubjectivation through militancy, I contend, that the Quilt’s form, with its emphasis on mourning and memorializing, cannot offer. After all, the Quilt as a public memorial performs a suturing of national identity—it stitches together the tatters of tolerance and equality that have been rent by the traumas of AIDS and homophobia—and as such it constitutes rhetorically a subject position for gay men that does not threaten this imagined compassionate nation. It is only by figuratively unstitching the Quilt, by risking desubjectivation and loss of social acceptance, that the possibilities emerge for reimagining the nation’s relationship to AIDS and homosexuality and for facilitating the legitimate mourning of the dead.

When we commemorate the Quilt’s anniversary, then, we memorialize not only the Quilt’s ability to name and remember the dead while comforting and providing a space for grieving for the living, but also its production of a mourned subject position. Since new names continue to be added to the Quilt, though, it does not merely mark a historical moment; rather, that history—of the Quilt, of AIDS, and of the nation’s relationship to homosexuality—is repeatedly reinscribed in the present. As we memorialize the dead, so we constitute the living, and as we remember the memorial, so we reconstitute the subject position that it effects. It is this resuscitation of the mourned subject position—a position that confers social recognition and acceptance, perhaps, but has not in the past and will not in the future lead to progressive shifts in national discourses about AIDS or sexuality—that is one of the troubling effects of the celebration of the Quilt’s anniversary.

By participating in this doubled commemoration, as this essay inevitably and paradoxically does, I hope for the possibility that its contribution might not be merely replicative, but also transformative. After all, if the Quilt provides a particular “framework of recognition,” then it need not be the case that the militant tactic of an activist, the sewing of a quilt panel, or even the writing of an essay are invariably determined by this framework; instead, it is in relation to this framework that these actions come to make sense, and it is here that the resources for risking the subject, for resubjectivation, and for acting differently might be found.
Thus, if the mourned subject can make sense in relation to the Quilt, then it is equally possible that another subject position—one that also incorporates militancy and sex and that enables activism—may become recognizable and inhabitable through the discourses of AIDS, homosexuality, and nation, from which the Quilt initially emerged and within which it continues to work.

NOTES

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4. Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 3, 13. Sturken uses the term “cultural memory” to designate shared memories that are not inscribed through official historical discourse. Also, cultural memory is a particular kind of collective memory that is produced and reinforced through the mediums and artifacts of popular culture.

5. Dickinson, Ott, and Aoki note that particular subject positions are produced by museums, memorials, and other public historical sites through their construction and reconstruction of national identities and histories. However, the subject position with which these authors are concerned is that of the viewer, rather than that of the individuals named by the memorial; that is, the viewer is invited to view a display from a particular perspective, thereby shaping their understanding of the world. Greg Dickinson, Brian L. Ott, and Eric Aoki, “Spaces of Remembering and Forgetting: The Reverent Eye/I at the Plains Indian Museum,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 3 (2006): 27–47.

6. “Positive,” VHS, directed by Rosa von Praunheim (New York: First Run Features,
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9. Peter S. Hawkins, “Naming Names: The Art of Memory and the Names Project AIDS Quilt,” Critical Inquiry 19 (1993): 752–779; “The AIDS Memorial Quilt,” http://www.aidsquilt.org/index.htm (accessed April 1, 2009); Cleve Jones, Stitching a Revolution: The Making of an Activist (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2000), 138; Crimp and Rolston, AIDS Demo Graphics, 13. ACT UP still exists today and is still involved in activist demonstrations designed to draw attention to the political nature of the AIDS epidemic, and to encourage awareness and increase funding and support for AIDS prevention and treatment. This essay is not intended to provide a comprehensive history of ACT UP, nor to address the ways in which its activism has developed and changed since its early years. It is the kind of militant activist tactics with which ACT UP is often associated that I am interested in discussing here; that is, ACT UP uses various modes of activism to accomplish its goals, and I do not claim that militant tactics are the most characteristic of the group or the most instrumentally effective. For extensive information about ACT UP’s history, as well as its current activities, see http://www.actupny.org.

10. Though this chapter deals exclusively with gay male subjectivity during the AIDS crisis, this is not to imply that women did not die of AIDS; did not mourn the deaths of friends, lovers, and family members; or were not involved in AIDS activism. In fact, women played a critical role in supporting the sick and dying gay men in their communities, as well as in agitating for better standards of care, better
access to drugs, etc. For more information on women and AIDS, see, for example, Katie Hogan, Women Take Care: Gender, Race, and the Culture of AIDS (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); Sarah Schulman, My American History: Lesbian and Gay Life during the Reagan/Bush Years (New York: Routledge, 1994); ACT UP / NY Women and AIDS Book Group, Women, AIDS, and Activism (Boston: South End Press, 1990).

11. I use the terms “gay men” and “the gay male community” throughout this chapter cautiously and provisionally in order to preserve the language used by Crimp, Sullivan, and other authors of the texts I examine. I want to point out, however, the problems of homogenization and essentialism that accompany such references to a diverse group of individuals. It should be understood that the gay men who were involved in ACT UP—and who are being described in this chapter—were primarily white, middle-class, and urban. The gay male subjectivities constituted within nondominant positions of race, class, religion, etc. cannot be presumed to be equivalent. However, I also preserve this potentially problematic language to point intentionally to the homogenizing force of the limited acceptance granted to gay men at this time; that is, one’s access to the mourned subject position depended on one’s ability to conform to the nonspecific descriptor “gay man.” For an analysis of race and class in AIDS and AIDS activism, see Phillip Brian Harper, “Eloquence and Epitaph: Black Nationalism and the Homophobic Impulse in Responses to the Death of Max Robinson,” in Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory, ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 239–263; Brett C. Stockdill, Activism against AIDS: At the Intersections of Sexuality, Race, Gender, and Class (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003).

12. “Positive.”

13. Ibid.

14. This is not to suggest that activist groups such as ACT UP saw no place for mourning or did not support the Quilt as an important activist move. On the contrary, ACT UP has called the Quilt “the largest, most creative, most personal, and most explicit memorial for people with AIDS ever,” and even in the group’s criticisms of the Quilt (for instance, ACT UP protested the inclusion of pharmaceutical company booths in a “wellness pavilion” at the Quilt’s 1996 display in Washington, D.C.) ACT UP continues to affirm and support its purpose. See ACT UP / New York, “Names Project Foundation Letter,” http://www.actupny.org/campaign96/NAMESLtr.html (accessed January 10, 2007); ACT UP / New York, “We Know When We’re Well, and When We’re Not,” http://www.actupny.org/campaign96/
PWAChand.html (accessed January 10, 2007). In addition, by considering the Quilt in relation to ACT UP, I do not mean to suggest that these two activist projects are antithetical in their objectives or in their effects. Rather, I want to highlight the differing rhetorical modes through which their tactics typically are carried out.

18. Crimp, “Mourning and Melancholia,” 140–141. The notion that the practices and sites of gay male sexuality may be viewed as a cultural development is also explored by Patrick Moore, who characterizes gay male sexual culture of the 1970s as a “social experiment” and as “art.” Patrick Moore, Beyond Shame: Reclaiming the Abandoned History of Radical Gay Sexuality (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004).
20. Ibid., 147 (emphasis added).
23. As AIDS relentlessly expands today to affect other American demographics (e.g., youth and African American women) and becomes a worldwide pandemic, the original presumed connection of AIDS to gay men is demonstrated to be false. However, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the association between AIDS and homosexuality was still powerful; arguably, regardless of epidemiological trends, AIDS will always be understood in America as a “gay disease.”
28. Crimp, “Spectacle of Mourning,” 197. Even this exemption, however, is conditional. Crimp makes this comment in order to point out the unexpectedness of a cartoon that callously ridicules the Quilt and viciously attacks a grieving community.


32. Ibid., 28, 104.


36. Sullivan, “When Plagues End,” 62, 76. Sullivan does not take a stance on the Quilt in “When Plagues End”; in fact, it is only mentioned once in passing in the entire article. By discussing Sullivan here in relation to the politics of the Quilt and ACT UP, I do not mean to align him with (or position him in opposition to) either activist endeavor; rather, I offer his “solution” as a way to illuminate the ways in which the mourned subject position may both enable and constrain the agency of the subject who occupies it.


38. Indeed, Sullivan’s own well-publicized brush with sexual hypocrisy (he was revealed to have solicited unprotected anal sex through an anonymous online ad) is a poignant example of the extent to which the renunciation of “shameful” behavior merely strengthens the unconscious attachment to the loss that cannot be grieved. Richard Kim, “Andrew Sullivan, Overexposed,” Nation, June 18, 2001, http://www.thenation.com/doc/20010618/kim20010605 (accessed March 1, 2007).


40. Crimp, Melancholia and Moralism, 11.

41. Jones, Stitching a Revolution, 168.

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50. One of the keynote speakers at the conference in Montreal was Cleve Jones, and his display of international Quilt panels was intended as “a symbol of international cooperation”—a cooperation that was, as he notes, “fractured from the first” by divisiveness amongst various factions of the audience and American policies that prevented HIV-positive travelers from entering the country. Jones, Stitching a Revolution, 177–178.
51. “Positive.”