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Some Thoughts About Doing Queer Public History Online

by:

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The death of George H. W. Bush in at the beginning of December 2018 now seems a distant political moment, a small coincidence in the march of time. But as the world responded to his passing on or about World AIDS Day, some patterns and networks of responses to this coincidence suggested an answer to the question: What might be a queer public history online? This paper will attempt this answer by focusing on how queer publics mediated this historic occasion,¹ focusing on how social media networks active and nurture these publics. I will begin with Avram Finkelstein's personal Facebook page. Finkelstein was an active member of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power and the agit-prop group Gran Fury, whose bold public-facing graphics continue to define the popular memory of the activist response to HIV/AIDS in New York City. He has recently published a major contribution to the field of AIDS history, *After Silence: A History of AIDS through Its Images*.² I noticed a pattern that Saturday, a recurring post on Finkelstein's page featured, at the top, a ghostly but high-contrast image of an angry-looking President Bush under the words SERIAL KILLER; at the bottom, a litany of Bush's failures to address HIV/AIDS during his presidency. The poster (Figure 1) was created by Finkelstein and Vincent Gagliostro for the 21 May 1990 ACT UP action at the National Institutes of Health.³ This and other images of ACT UP's anti-Bush actions circulated quite well throughout the day. The language of those images reverberated, soon circulating as a headline in *OUT Magazine*, an American LGBTQ publication.⁴

In a conversation about these posts on his page, Finkelstein saw possibility in the gathering of like-minded people on Facebook. "People squat on my page...[and] consider my history theirs and use it as a way of gauging their own feelings about a moment."⁵ His is a critical approach towards Facebook, not as a neutral space of sociality but as a space where control and ownership "of our image commons in a digital age' is at stake."⁶ Privatization and alienation abound in social media—it is not a public space because, for Finkelstein, "public spaces are by nature interrogative" and on Facebook, the self-mediation is "declarative rather than interrogative", and "in order for [public spaces] to function, they need to be, they should be [interrogative]."⁷ Finkelstein's pointed towards possibilities of social media which emphasize 'meaning making' and 'consciousness raising' throughout in our conversation, the latter a political practice with deep roots in the U. S. left and of particular importance to Finkelstein.

1 Michel Foucault, "Friendship as a Way of Life," in *Foucault Live: Interviews, 1961-1984*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. John Johnston, Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series (New York, NY: Semiotexte(e), 1989), 207.

2 Avram Finkelstein, *After Silence: A History of AIDS through Its Images* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018).

3 Avram Finkelstein, Personal Communication, video call, December 20, 2018.

4 Phillip Picardi, "'George Bush, Serial Killer': ACT UP's Fight Against the President," *OUT Magazine*, December 1, 2018, <https://www.out.com/out-exclusives/2018/12/01/george-bush-serial-killer-act-ups-fight-against-president>.

5 Finkelstein, Personal Communication.

6 Finkelstein, Personal Communication.

7 Finkelstein, Personal Communication.

As news of Bush's death spread via breaking news alerts and posts, I first caught wind of his passing early in the morning in London. I remember thinking that the former President hadn't actually died. There is the true order of events, that Bush's death on 30 November did not align with the annual marking of World AIDS Day on the first of December, but there is also the very real feeling (based on Bush's late-evening death and the peak of commemoration taking place the next day) that it did—an agreed upon fact which guided the many conversations and tweets which this paper will take as its subject. If history will not agree with us, what are we to make of this feeling of history's potential coincidences, the rhyming of time and space? for our spectacles and our sensations of outrage? I first read the news in a joke, a clever Ariana Grande reference the day after her much-anticipated music video dropped.⁸ It was a tweet of an unflattering picture of Henry Kissinger (figure 2) captioned with "George H. W. Bush: *dies*/me: thank u, next."⁹ It took a few more hours for me to understand that he had actually died.

I can recall this sort of feeling when other monumental figures of the American right-wing passed away, notably when Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia was found suddenly dead—there was a queer and communal joy that rang out over texts and online: "Dead Scalia Twitter is lit."¹⁰ Online and off my friends react to these events with humour and glee. More than just a good laugh, it is a means of reinforcing a shared understanding of the history attached to a given figure, a history that we tell differently than those in power.

The titular *queer* in this essay might best be located here. Not affixed to particular sexual practices or identities gender identities but instead attached to the forms of relations to which those social conditions attune us. Queer is the enactment of a sensation of difference, and a desire to see the world contain the possibilities that that sensation inaugurates. As Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner note in their essay "Sex in Public," "queer worlds do not have the power to represent a taken-for-granted social existence."¹¹ We must craft this public, and the relations contained within will always already be novel. It is in this way that the cumulative effect of these small actions taken online, habitual responses to networks we participate in, might be a public history made across a shared infrastructure of queer repose because they already intend to alter those dominant infrastructures which hold us uncomfortably to narratives which would have us erased.

Here is a good place to look a bit more historically, to return to the media from those early days in December. But first, to draw further back, let's remind ourselves that these queer public networks did not and do not arise merely in

8 Ariana Grande, "thank u, next," November 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gl1aHhXnN1k>.

9 Volcelot Revolver (@costaggini), "George H. W. Bush: *dies* Me: Thank u, next Pic.Twitter.Com/QhpVt3fUcl," Tweet (blog), December 1, 2018, <https://twitter.com/costaggini/status/1068744267160375298>.

10 Brandy Jensen @BrandyLJensen, "Dead Scalia Twitter Is Lit," Tweet (blog), February 13, 2016, <https://twitter.com/BrandyLJensen/status/698645791850758145>.

11 Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant, "Sex in Public," in *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York, NY: Zone Books, 2002), 314, note 22.

response to Bush's death. On 11 March 2016, Zed Books tweeted Donald Moffett's "He Kills Me" (1987)¹² poster (Figure 3a) after Hillary Clinton grossly misstated Nancy Reagan's commitment to HIV/AIDS on the occasion of Reagan's funeral.¹³ Then-candidate Clinton commented on MSNBC:

It may be hard for your viewers to remember how difficult it was for people to talk about HIV/AIDS back in the 1980s, and because of both President and Mrs. Reagan, in particular Mrs. Reagan, we started a national conversation when before nobody would talk about it, nobody wanted to do anything about it, and, you know, that too is something that I really appreciate with her very effective, low-key advocacy, but it penetrated the public conscious and people began to say "Hey we've got to do something about this too."¹⁴

Clinton posits herself as both as knowing more about the history of HIV/AIDS and by saying "we," insinuates herself as a central figure in the AIDS crisis, displacing community activists with an alliance of herself and the notably uncaring Nancy Reagan.¹⁵ I replied to Zed Book's tweet of Moffett's original poster—a diptych of an orange and black target pattern paired with a formal portrait of President Reagan created for the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) to protest Reagan's late and insufficient response to AIDS—with new images: replacing Reagan in Moffett's composition with similar formal portraits of Clinton and Mrs. Reagan (Figure 3b) overlaid with the text "SHE KILLS ME."¹⁶

As Clinton misrepresented the past, we were able to recollect it and reengage with the tools of 1987 in 2016. That same aesthetic gesture still had weight. Sharing my new Nancy Reagan poster on Facebook, Ted Kerr wrote "Her Nostalgia Is Killing People,"¹⁷ calling back to Vincent Chevalier and Ian Bradley-Perrin 2013 contribution to poster/VIRUS, *Your Nostalgia Is Killing Me!* (Figure 4), wherein nostalgia is configured as "the unpinning of our past from the

12 International Center of Photography, "He Kills Me," International Center of Photography, March 3, 2016, <https://www.icp.org/browse/archive/objects/he-kills-me>.

13 Zed Books (@ZedBooks), "#ANationalConversation @HillaryClinton pic.twitter.com/VtYWA3li4k," Tweet, (blog), March 11, 2016, <https://twitter.com/ZedBooks/status/708389966729125888>.

14 MSNBC (@MSNBC), "Hillary Clinton: The Reagans, Particularly Nancy, Helped Start 'a National Conversation' about HIV and AIDS. <http://Nbcnews.to/1RcyBSw>," Tweet (blog), March 11, 2016, <https://twitter.com/MSNBC/status/708363242737766401>.

15 Michael Specter, "Hillary Clinton, Nancy Reagan, and AIDS," *New Yorker*, March 12, 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/hillary-clinton-nancy-reagan-and-aids>.

16 Virgil B/G Taylor (@fag_tips), "They All Kill Me @ZedBooks @HillaryClintonpic.Twitter.Com/SgOVdQLqtc," Tweet (blog), March 11, 2016, https://twitter.com/fag_tips/status/708412193906302976.

17 Theodore (Ted) Kerr, "Theodore Kerr - Her Nostalgia Is Killing People..." Facebook, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/theodore.kerr.1/posts/10153314066236300>.

circumstances from which the fights were born.¹⁸ The work being done here, online, is the repinning our present to its pasts, against the tides that would leave us unattached, and affirming that “the history [is] real and tethered to a time and place and reason such that the output is responding to today and is ready for tomorrow.¹⁹”

The immediate coverage of Bush’s demise was glowing. A video posted alongside his *New York Times* obituary calls him the nation’s “uncle²⁰” and the obituary itself does not once mention HIV/AIDS.²¹ Broadly, it seems the mass media was inclined to rosily recall Bush and to not mention his legacy on HIV/AIDS (not to mention his other legacies of violence as a President and CIA director). The obituaries were indeed quite warm: *The Economist* folksily gave their obituary the headline “Doing his darnedest.²²” Widely, his death was framed the loss of a certain kind of public figure—the loss of respectability and “hard-hearted²³” WASP patricians. Like Clinton’s twisted recollection of the Reagans, nostalgia for imaginary good service overshadows the past and its troubles. Ross Douthat’s paeon²⁴ to these lost (elected) aristocrats was quickly parodied.²⁵ This attitude of reverence was widespread and well-enforced, involving the whole country with few expenses spared: the United States Postal Service suspended deliveries²⁶ and a special funeral train crossed Texas towards his grave, the first since Eisenhower.²⁷

Some mass media eventually came to less hagiographic conclusions on Bush’s legacy. *Democracy Now!* ran nine headlines in the week following his death detailing Bush’s “war crimes,” “racism,” “his many victims” and more.²⁸ *The Intercept*’s podcast called him a war criminal, with host Jeremy Scahill saying that the President “spent the overwhelming majority of his life making the world a worse place, a more dangerous place,” and described the days following his death as “a grotesque canonization of one of [the United States] imperial saints... every media outlet in this country, every politician, Democrat and Republican, is

18 Vincent Chevalier and Ian Bradley-Perrin, “Your Nostalgia Is Killing Me!,” poster/VIRUS, 2013, <http://postervirus.tumblr.com/post/67569099579/your-nostalgia-is-killing-me-vincent-chevalier>.

19 Chevalier and Bradley-Perrin, “Your Nostalgia Is Killing Me!”

20 Peter Baker, Robin Stein, and David Bott, *George H.W. Bush: A Life of Public Service* (The New York Times, 2018), <https://www.nytimes.com/video/obituaries/100000005865853/president-george-h-w-bush-obituary.html>.

21 Adam Nagourney, “George Bush, Who Steered Nation in Tumultuous Times, Is Dead at 94,” *The New York Times*, December 5, 2018, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/30/us/politics/george-hw-bush-dies.html>.

22 *The Economist*, “Obituary: George H.W. Bush Died on November 30th,” *The Economist*, December 8, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/obituary/2018/12/08/obituary-george-hw-bush-died-on-november-30th>.

23 Franklin Foer, “The Last WASP President,” *The Atlantic*, December 2, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/12/george-hw-bush-last-wasp-president/577156/>.

24 Ross Douthat, “Opinion I Why We Miss the WASPs,” *The New York Times*, December 5, 2018, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/05/opinion/george-bush-wasps.html>.

25 Consumerjism (@kamilumin), “pic.twitter.com/8sWljb4kTl,” Tweet (blog), December 5, 2018, <https://twitter.com/kamilumin/status/1070314836901462017>.

26 United States Postal Service, “National Day of Mourning | USPS,” December 2018, <https://www.usps.com/national-day-of-mourning/welcome.htm>.

27 Will Weissert and David J. Phillip, “Bush’s Presidential Funeral Train First in Nearly 50 Years,” AP NEWS, December 7, 2018, <https://apnews.com/fd4a3d8b2a9e4b8199637174ecc4ef26>.

28 Democracy Now!, “Show Archive: December 2018,” Democracy Now!, accessed January 3, 2019, <https://www.democracynow.org/shows/2018/12>.

engaged in collective eulogy based on lies.²⁹ WNYC's *On The Media* asked, in their broadcast one week after Bush's death, what would it mean give an honest account of his legacy. The host, Brooke Gladstone, concluded that we cannot give over questions of legacy to eulogy. Presidents are "not a subject for public eulogizing like a film star. He, so far he, no longer belongs to his family or friends." Quoting her guest Anne Helen Petersen, of Buzzfeed, Gladstone admonishes her listeners that the President "by dint of the power he wields belongs to us all."³⁰ The funeral of a President, in this frame, is a moment to take personally the history and legacy of the nation.

On social media folks rushed to correct the record. Lena Solow tweeted: "mourning the thousands who died of AIDS while Reagan/Bush laughed, cut AIDS research, barred HIV+ people from entering country. never sugarcoat[sic] a president's legacy after death, but especially not on World AIDS Day."³¹ This initial tweet did quite well on the social network, at the time of writing garnering 19,132 retweets and 60,001 likes.³² Witnessing this sudden and substantial gathering around her post, Solow reached out to her friends, including the writer, to research replies to her post that would not only back up her claims, but add to her reader's understanding: imploring in one reply "don't forget your history - civility didn't make the WH [White House] focus on AIDS, sustained militant direct action did."³³

In her essay 'The Commons: Infrastructures for Troubling Times' the queer theorist and historian Lauren Berlant defines

"structure' ... as that which organizes transformation and 'infrastructure' as that which binds us to the world in movement and keeps the world practically bound to itself; and I am proposing that one task for makers of critical social form is to offer not just judgment about positions and practices in the world, but terms of transition that alter the harder and softer, tighter and looser infrastructures of sociality itself."³⁴

29 Intercepted, "Intercepted Podcast: George H.W. Bush (1924-2018), American War Criminal," *The Intercept* (blog), December 5, 2018, <https://theintercept.com/2018/12/05/george-h-w-bush-1924-2018-american-war-criminal/>.

30 Brooke Gladstone, "Remembering the President Completely | On the Media," *WNYC Studios*, December 7, 2018, <https://www.wnycstudios.org/story/remembering-president-completely>.

31 Lena Solow, "Mourning the Thousands Who Died of AIDS While Reagan/Bush Laughed, Cut AIDS Research, Barred HIV+ People from Entering Country. Never Sugarcoat a President's Legacy after Death, but Especially Not on World AIDS Day," Tweet, @lenaruthsolow (blog), December 1, 2018, <https://twitter.com/lenaruthsolow/status/1068876734139953152>.

32 Lena Solow, "Mourning the Thousands Who Died..."

33 Lena Solow (@lenaruthsolow), "And Speaking of the Past, Don't Forget Your History - Civility Didn't Make the WH Focus on AIDS, Sustained Militant Direct Action Didhttps://Newint.Org/Columns/Mark-Engler/2017/07/01/Act-up ...," Tweet (blog), December 1, 2018, <https://twitter.com/lenaruthsolow/status/1068943419152769025>.

34 Lauren Berlant, "The Commons: Infrastructures for Troubling Times*," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 34, no. 3 (June 2016): 394, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775816645989>.

The re-mediated history, the means and methods of sharing on Twitter and Facebook and the direct messages which cut across these platforms, are kinds of *structure*: sharing to counter the mainstream narrative can be transformative. But it is humour, glee, the queer reconfiguring that is the *infrastructure*—“that which binds us to the world in movement and keeps the world practically bound to itself.” These modes, my focus, are what we hold onto as we travel, what keeps us returning, the very base from which we make meaning, what enables us to recognize and hear each other through the noise of a room or a Twitter timeline. Berlant’s call to action can be read as a call for the “consciousness raising” that Finkelstein staked out as his goal for his Facebook presence. This task cuts to the responsibility of these queer actors online (and, as always, off).

In a reading at The Poetry Project in New York City, Sophia Hussain presented a new unpublished essay poem entitled “Time”³⁵ (Appendix A) which regards with rage the deaths of both Bush and his wife Barbara Bush in 2018—eight months apart—with a critique which echoes and shapes this essay.³⁶ Hussain breaks into laughter while reading the line “When Barbara Bush died, the Women’s March tweeted: “Rest in peace and power Barbara Bush.[³⁷”³⁸” Hussain’s laugh begs the question: How could an organization that claims to be “grassroots,” “inclusive” and “resistance”³⁹ venerate a public figure whose record is at odds with their own? Hussain ad-libs through a wide smile “They haven’t taken it down.” These deaths are critical moments of political revelation. The audience at the Poetry Project laughs with Hussain. When Professor Claire Potter tweeted sympathetically about George W. Bush’s personal loss, students at her university responded by posting screenshots of her tweet on campus: “Twitter-shaming...gone post-digital!”⁴⁰ Shaming, sure, but also an expression of a desire to have one’s own version of the story publicly told. When we let well-tarnished public records be polished, we are witnessing our own erasure from history. This is more than mere shaming or mere laughter. Hussain frames these laughs and tweets as “the glee of refusal, and how good that feels”⁴¹ or, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick famously asks us: “What makes pleasure and amelioration so “mere”?”⁴²

Understanding the means of mediation are essential to any history,

35 Sophia Hussain, “Time” (Poem, December 3, 2018).

36 The Poetry Project, “Sophia Hussain & Dave Morse,” The Poetry Project, 2018, <https://www.poetryproject.org/events/sophia-hussain-dave-morse/>.

37 Women’s March (@womensmarch), “Rest in Peace and Power, Barbara Bush.Pic.Twitter.Com/Gl8eYd8A6,” Tweet (blog), April 18, 2018, <https://twitter.com/womensmarch/status/986418934852280320?lang=en>.

38 Justin Lane Briggs, *Sophia Hussain, Poetry Project 12.03.18 Pt 1* (The Poetry Project, 2018), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2aHcLzc8rqc>.

39 Women’s March, “Unity Principles,” Women’s March, 2018, <https://www.womensmarch.com/principles/>.

40 Claire Potter (@TenuredRadical), “And in Case You Are Inerested, @TomSugrue, Apparently the Twitter-Shaming Has Actually Gone Post-Digital! These, Apparently, Are Posted around @TheNewSchool. It’s so Odd That Expressing Sympathy for Someone Whose Parents Died Has Produced Such Hysteriopic.Twitter.Com/U4Soolp4V1,” Tweet (blog), December 6, 2018, <https://twitter.com/TenuredRadical/status/1070701116126564352>.

41 Hussain, “Time.”

42 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Series Q (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 144.

particularly for the history of the oppressed, who we might best understand as taking up these means not by choice but out of necessity. We must attend to moments of exclusion from mediation.⁴³ We must also listen closely to the ways in which we are seen or heard. Writing in 1990, Ray Navarro and Cat Saalfield reflect that, “for a new Person With AIDS (PWA), his lover, and their friend, the phone becomes a veritable lifeline connecting us with each other and with our cultures, those which have affirmed us, prepared us, sustained us, moved us from being “innocent” to being armed.”⁴⁴

The AIDS crisis gave new meanings to the world around us. In *Equipped*, another co-authored work from 1990 with Zoe Leonard, Navarro and Leonard reimagine the artifacts of Navarro’s illness, shortly before he passed away—his wheelchair, walker and cane—as sexy libidinal prostheses (Figure 5).⁴⁵ If in Navarro’s work we see AIDS as an occasion for the transformation of these devices, perhaps we can also engage with the remediation of the internet as something more than it is, even as it remediates us. As noted by Dan Udy, “HIV infection became re-configured as a chronic but manageable illness just as Internet access entered a period of rapid expansion with the coincidental deployment of the first effective protease inhibitors and the first mass-market web browser, Netscape Navigator in 1995.”⁴⁶

As in any year, 2018 was marked by the loss of notable public figures. Although ‘astonishing’ numbers of readers turned to the New York Times’ obituary pages that year,⁴⁷ it is difficult to say if any year is more or less about the death of the famous. But these notable, newsworthy deaths—the surprising and coincidental ones in particular—are a productive ground for contending with history and our relationship to it. Although I’ve selected just a few key examples, these deaths and coincidences are illuminated not by a few loud critics but, to quote George H.W. Bush, by ‘a thousand points of light.’⁴⁸ Each of us join in a chorus—a loud cacophony of assonance and dissonance, resounding and clamouring together, and it is this echoic quality that offers one a sense of scale, as Wendy Hui Kyong Chun suggests: “Repetition becomes a way to measure scale in an almost inconceivably vast communications network.”⁴⁹ In her book *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media*, Chun makes strides against

43 Theodore (Ted) Kerr, “AIDS 1969: HIV, History, and Race,” *Drain Magazine* 13, no. 2 (2016), <http://drainmag.com/aids-1969-hiv-history-and-race/>.

44 Ray Navarro and Catherine Saalfield, “Shocking Pink Praxis: Race and Gender on the ACT UP Frontlines,” in *Inside/out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991).

45 Ray Navarro and Zoe Leonard, “Equipped,” [icaboston.org](https://www.icaboston.org/art/ray-navarro-zoe-leonard/equipped), 2018, <https://www.icaboston.org/art/ray-navarro-zoe-leonard/equipped>.

46 Udy, “Going Viral: Remediating AIDS in the YouTube Decade,” 24.

47 William McDonald, “Deaths Seized the Attention of Millions in 2018, Sometimes Surprisingly,” *The New York Times*, December 27, 2018, sec. Obituaries, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/26/obituaries/deaths-in-2018.html>.

48 George H.W. Bush, “Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in New Orleans | The American Presidency Project,” August 18, 1988, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-accepting-the-presidential-nomination-the-republican-national-convention-new>.

49 Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, “The Enduring Ephemeral, or the Future Is a Memory,” *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 1 (September 2008): 148–71, <https://doi.org/10.1086/595632>.

framing new media as *new* and presents a model of digital media as a field of habituation and crisis.⁵⁰ We might imagine these historic coincidences as crises—moments of exception that reveal our habits. The crisis is when the mask is pulled off, the revelation of our assumptions of norms, allowing us to see the gaps we mistook for solid ground. These moments of crisis are made critical through the shock of seeing glowing recollections of figures we might better describe with words like “genocidal.”⁵¹ They become crises as new media has habituated our relationship to mass media, and on these occasions those media rub against our ways of using these (new) media. Chun’s work and attention to network theory is particularly suggestive for public history. Chun writes that: “Networks are both science fiction and the historical present. They describe future projections as though they really existed; they relay past events as if they were unfolding in the present.”⁵² Here Chun is mapping digital networks as a mode of interacting with time. In that *time* is always at play or in question on the network—we might understand that those of us who find ourselves well-mediated, well-reflected in networked communities, as always already doing a sort of public history.

Queerness is the inappropriate pose which pervades these online activities: “I hate to dance on his grave, but...well, here I am, cutting a rug.”⁵³ We laugh, we thunder in our shared outrage, we form new bonds in our sense of history. We might extend Elizabeth Freeman’s erotohistoriography from the erotic and into the gleeful and rageful: “the “inappropriate” response of eros in the face of sorrow as a trace of past forms of pleasure located in specific historical moments.”⁵⁴ It is worth noting that in the contemporary queer’s interaction with platforms like Twitter (and until recently Tumblr⁵⁵) the content discussed here is often interrupted with erotic and pornographic material, the boundary between the two is fungible. In my own work I have found intermingling the erotic with the “gleeful or rageful” feelings that intersperse it to be productive. Freeman’s theoretical framework also attends to the *feeling* of history. The digital is as tactile as it is imagined. The glass slab of the smartphone should be seen as a locus of intimacy that, as Evan Calder Williams puts it, we ‘touch, rub, tap, worry, flick, and stroke...at least once an hour, almost every hour.’⁵⁶ While the feelings expressed above are not strictly erotic, the manner of expression onto these tightly held object certainly is adjacent to *eros*; we may not be fucking⁵⁷ but we are feeling history with every thwack of thumb to glass.

50 Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2016), 2.

51 Hussain, “Time.”

52 Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same*, 50.

53 margarine of error, “@BrandyLJensen I Hate to Dance on His Grave, but..Well, Here I Am, Cutting a Rug.”

54 Elizabeth Freeman, “Time Binds, or, Erotohistoriography,” *Social Text* 23, no. 3-4 (84-85) (2005): 65.

55 BBC News, “Tumblr to Ban All Pornographic Content,” December 3, 2018, sec. Technology, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-46434711>.

56 Evan Calder Williams, *Shard Cinema* (London: Repeater Books, an imprint of Watkins Media Ltd, 2017), 38.

57 謝謝 (@tiffany4scale), “This Onscreen Keyboard Likes a Good Spanking from My Thumbs,” Tweet (blog), March 8, 2017, <https://twitter.com/tiffany4scale/status/839349262550990848>.

The work done online is not merely to witness the absence of representation, rather it is the communal, habitual, remediation of each other towards the ends of witnessing itself. Negative feelings recall Heather Love's notion that queerness' 'disposition toward the past—embracing loss, risking abjection—[is evoked]...with the phrase "feeling backward."⁵⁸ Carolyn Dinshaw's offer of 'a queer historical awareness of multiplicity' might also account for the queerness of this history-making at hand.⁵⁹ The past is always present is always past in queerness. Epidemics inspire historical thinking: how long will it endure, how quickly will it spread, when did it begin? HIV/AIDS is no exception and has long been entangled with history. The AIDS crisis is, as suggested, an historic occasion. It is an occasion that troubles the instance of *occasion*, extending instead across decades, defining the past and occurring actively today. And more than a mere opportunity to reimagine society, it is a call to arms, an ongoing demand for survival.

* * *

During our conversation Finkelstein told me about a spell he cast with members his affinity group, Anonymous Queers. A 30-day candle burning spell—stretching from the 1991 Kennebunkport action to a planned march on Washington, D.C. At the end of the spell, Finkelstein threw the remainders of the candle wax over the White House fence, a prefiguration of the 1992 Ashes Action, and mailed the rest to the White House to get the wax inside. Finkelstein

started this huge fight at this occult store called Magical Child, because I was asking the person who worked there if he wanted to change someone's mind, should it be a green candle or a white candle? The entire store got involved in this conversation, but it turned into a very heated argument as to whether or not trying to change someone's mind was black magic. Then I was like, "Well, if it's for the greater good and more lives will be [saved]"⁶⁰

58 Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, First Harvard University Press paperback edition (Cambridge, Massachusetts London, England: Harvard University Press, 2009), 30.

59 Carolyn Dinshaw, "Temporalities," in *Middle English*, ed. Paul Strohm, Repr, Oxford Twenty-First Century Approaches to Literature (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011), 122.

60 Finkelstein, Personal Communication.

I might propose that, at their best, the gestures which structure the tweets and posts discussed here are like spells, controversial and potential black magics. Language used with its most potent purpose, to not only offer but make new social forms: an ever-expanding field of inappropriate responses meant, at the very least, to figure the normative affections for Presidents past absurd (Figure 7).⁶¹ These are spells for the “greater good” and, while not saving lives with the urgency of ACT UP in 1991, are cast with the intention to make real alterations to the “infrastructures of sociality itself.” And who knows, some spells might actually work: “I should say we never really claimed credit for George Bush vomiting on the prime minister of Japan, but it happened very shortly after the end of the candle spell.”⁶²

APPENDIX A (UNPUBLISHED MATERIAL)

TIME

BY SOPHIA HUSSAIN

George H.W. Bush is dead and I’m thinking about all the time he got — 8 more months even than Barbara.

I would try, in this essay, to limit my quoting of twitter — but it is where the best minds of my generation have assembled. Where every few months, the video of Muntadhar al- Zaidi throwing a shoe at George W. Bush resources for our shared enjoyment. If a ball will not drop or a clocktower will not rejoice at this, we’ll loop the video over and over.

When Barbara Bush died, the Women’s March tweeted: “Rest in peace and power Barbara Bush”

The queer Arab American writer Randa Jarrar tweeted, “Barbara Bush was a generous and smart and amazing racist who, along with her husband, raised a war criminal” — and got death threats. The clip we posted of her reading at the Asian American Writers’ Workshop, where I work, quickly got scanned and copied to inflame the far right. We took it down to prevent this escalation.

The president of Fresno state, where Jarrar has tenure, tepidly defended

61 pe moskowitz (@_pem_pem), “pic.twitter.com/Xno8bdAKjx,” Tweet (blog), December 3, 2018, https://twitter.com/_pem_pem/status/1069700995830173696.

62 Finkelstein, Personal Communication.

her, claiming that Jarrar had spoken as a “private citizen” but her words were “obviously contrary to the core values of our University.” In some cases, it was an issue of free speech, and in other occasions, not quite; “beyond free speech. This was disrespectful.” No critic of American empire, and an Arab woman no less, gets to be a private citizen, and so many “citizens” don’t really get to be citizens.

What I am trying to say is that civility is only aspirational in the sense that many would like to hide war crimes, and state violence. Let us be uncivil.

“A professor with tenure does not have blanket protection to say and do what they wish,” he said. “We are all held accountable for our actions.”

The University lowered their flag to half mast, and Jarrar went on leave for a semester. And on Sunday I woke up to read things about George HW Bush like “He was the best one-term president”

And I’m wondering how we are counting — both the hours and the bodies

“best one-term president”

Killed the most people in one term? The least? With stunning efficiency? The Gulf War was famously only “100 hours.”

“I feel tension in the stomach and in the neck ... but I also feel a certain calmness when we talk about these matters,” Bush said of the 1991 Gulf War.

The far right and progressives and civility extremists, latched on to Jarrar’s “amazing racist,”

I’d like to think they were so angry to discover the glee of refusal, and how good that feels
and its potential for contagion

It turns out it is easy to tell the truth — it just makes people mad but Jarrar had more to say.

In another tweet, the professor wrote: “I’m happy the witch is dead. can’t wait for the rest of her family to fall to their demise the way 1.5 million iraqis have. byyyyyyyyyy.”

Other ways we could count:

8 women groped

\$1.5 billion increase in spending on the drug war

The number of loved ones' ashes flung on the White House lawn on October 11, 1992. It was 12 years into the AIDS epidemic, read: 12 years of genocidal policy, that ACT UP organized the action to throw ashes on the White House lawn.

Recalling the calmness that George HW Bush remarked upon the Gulf War;

George Bush believes that
the White House gates shield him,
from you, your loss, and his responsibility for the AIDS crisis. Now it is time to
bring AIDS home to George Bush.

I am writing because I am angry that George HW got to live as long as he did.
My rage is simple. And I am angry because the world makes me envious of time
and how it becomes hoarded — a luxury. I want to be alive but I hold longevity in
contempt, because our enemies appear to control our bodies and also time.

We cannot recover the bodies but we can say “amazing racist” and mean it. And
what will we call this uncertain time we have.

From 1987-1989 Felix Gonzales Torres worked on a series called “Untitled
(Perfect Lovers).” Perfect Lovers. Two standard issue, batter operated wall clocks
next two each other, in sync, telling the same time. Commercial, mechanical,
wedded to standard time — yet why are they touching? Gonzalez-Torres made
the work created this work shortly

after his partner was diagnosed with AIDS. He wrote a short piece, with a
drawing of the two clocks in blue ink on top of the page.

“Lovers, 1988

Don't be afraid of the clocks, they are our time, time has been generous to us.
We imprinted time with the sweet taste of victory. We conquered fate by meeting
at a certain TIME in a certain space. We are a product of the time, therefore we
give back credit where it is due: time.

We are synchronized, now and forever. I love you.”

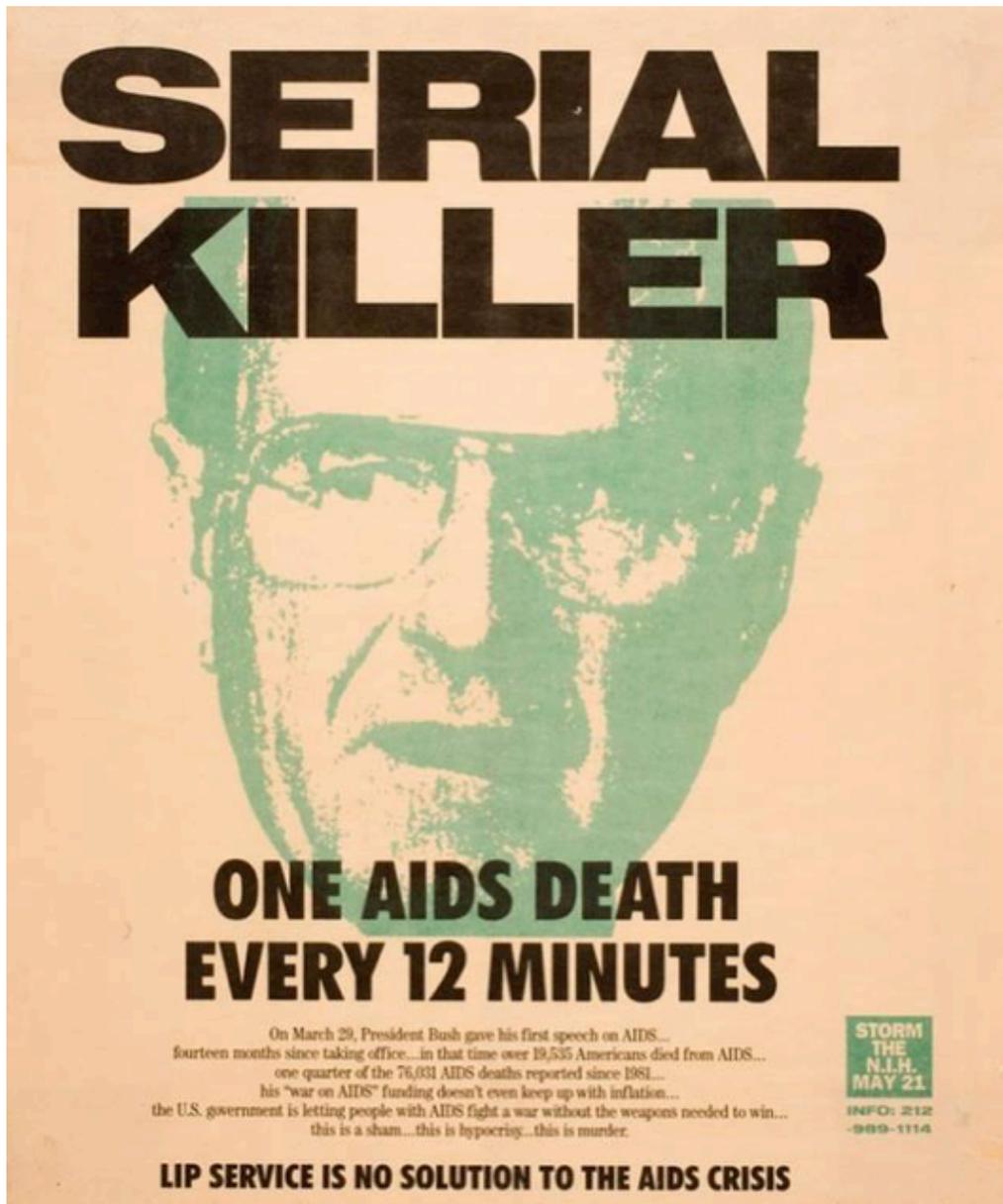


Figure 1: Avram Finkelstein, (1991)
Reproduced from Avram Finkelstein,
'Avram Finkelstein', *Facebook*, 2018
<<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10216594333423503&set=a.1078897445373&type=3&theater>>
[accessed 29 December 2018]

Figure 2: © 2017, Molly Riley-Pool / Getty. Reproduced from Volcelot Revolver, 'George H. W. Bush: *dies* Me: Thank u, next Pic.Twitter. Com/QhpVt3fUcl', @costaggini, 2018 <<https://twitter.com/costaggini/status/1068744267160375298>> [accessed 26 December 2018]



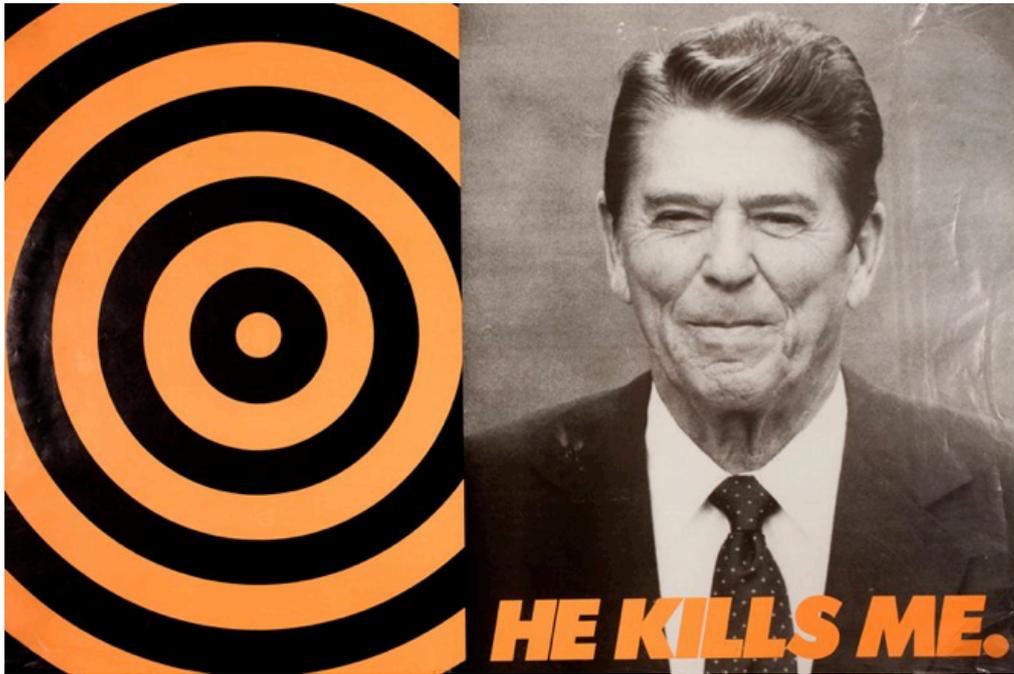


Figure 3a (above): Donald Moffett, *He Kills Me* (1987). Reproduced from Zed Books, '#ANationalConversation @HillaryClinton pic.twitter.com/VtYWA3li4k', @ZedBooks, 2016 <<https://twitter.com/ZedBooks/status/708389966729125888>> [accessed 26 December 2018]

Figure 3b (below): Virgil B/G Taylor, *She Kills Me (Nancy) after Donald Moffett* (2016). Reproduced from Taylor, Virgil B/G, 'They All Kill Me @ZedBooks @HillaryClintonpic.Twitter.Com/SgOVdQLqtc', @fag_tips, 2016 <https://twitter.com/fag_tips/status/708412193906302976> [accessed 26 December 2018]



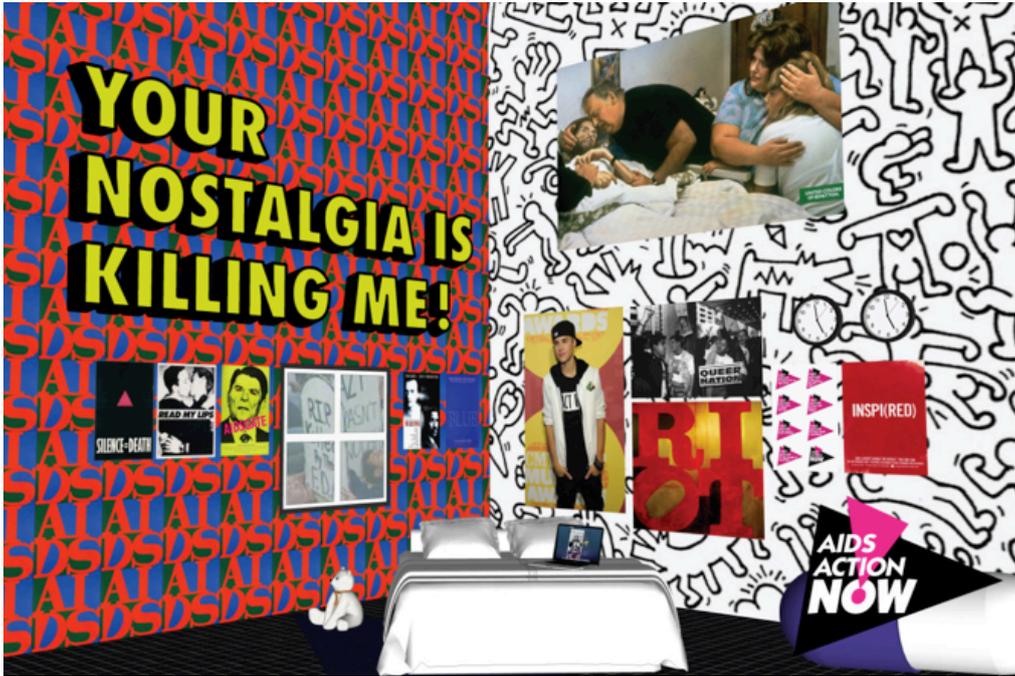


Figure 4 (above): Vincent Chevalier and Ian Bradley-Perrin, *Your Nostalgia is Killing Me!* (2013). Reproduced from Chevalier, Vincent, and Ian Bradley-Perrin, 'Your Nostalgia Is Killing Me!', *Poster/VIRUS*, 2013 <<http://postervirus.tumblr.com/post/67569099579/your-nostalgia-is-killing-me-vincent-chevalier>> [accessed 26 December 2018]

Figure 5 (below): Ray Navarro and Zoe Leonard, *Equipped* (1990). Reproduced from Navarro, Ray, and Zoe Leonard, 'Equipped', *Icaboston.Org*, 2018 <<https://www.icaboston.org/art/ray-navarro-zoe-leonard/equipped>> [accessed 26 December 2018]





Figure 6: Virgil B/G Taylor, *Masturbation* from *Utopia_11.gif* (2016). Reproduced from Taylor, Virgil B/G, 'Utopia_11.Gif', *Fag Tips*, 2016 <<http://www.fag.tips/giftopia/>> [accessed 29 December 2018]

Figure 7: Reproduced from moskowitz, pe, 'pic.twitter.com/Xno8bdAKjx', @_pem_pem, 2018 <https://twitter.com/_pem_pem/status/1069700995830173696> [accessed 26 December 2018]

mat3e.github.io/brains

<p>The New Yorker @NewYorker</p> <p>George H. W. Bush, who died on Friday, had an irreducible niceness to him, an appealing mixture of noblesse oblige, parody-begging goofiness, and boy-next-door bonhomie.</p>	
<p>The Atlantic @TheAtlantic</p> <p>George H. W. Bush may have been a man of class and grace, argues @FranklinFoer, but good manners are hardly the same as moral courage:</p> 	
<p>daniel @repeatedmistake</p> <p>don't forget that not only was george bush sr a war criminal, he was also a disgusting rapist</p> 	
<p>Alt Davey Wavey (Personal) @chatroomgirl</p> <p>RIP George H. W. Binch</p> <p>12:10 AM - 1 Dec 2018</p>	