PLEASURE

BY CALEB CRAIN

QUEER THEORISTS AND GAY JOURNALISTS WRESTLE OVER THE POLITICS OF SEX
Nearly two hundred men and women have come to sit in the sweaty ground-floor assembly hall of New York City’s Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center. They’ve tucked their gym bags under their folding chairs, and, despite the thick late-June heat, they’re fully alert. Dozens more men and women cram the edges of the room, leaning against manila-colored card tables littered with Xeroxes or perching on the center’s grade-school-style water fountain, a row of three faucets in a knee-high porcelain trough. A video camera focuses on the podium, where activist Gregg Gonsalves and Columbia University law professor Kendall Thomas welcome the audience to a teach-in sponsored by the new organization Sex Panic.

It might have been the Sex Panic flyer reading DANGER! ASSAULT! TURDZ! that drew this crowd. Handed out in New York City’s gay bars and coffee shops, the flyer identified continuing HIV transmission as the danger. It pointed to the recent closing of gay and transgender bars and an increase in arrests for public lewdness as the assault. And it named gay writers Andrew Sullivan, Michelangelo Signorile, Larry Kramer, and Gabriel Rotello as the Turdz.
DURING THE teach-in Bérubé will sketch a history of American “sex panics”; Maura Bairley of the New York City Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project (AVP) will report that earlier this year sixty-seven men were arrested over two days in a single World Trade Center restroom; attorney Bill Dobbs will explain the new city zoning law due to close an estimated 85 percent of New York’s 175 adult businesses; and a mustachioed drag king named Murray Hill will campaign for mayor. But it is hard to look away from the brawl too soon. The emotions in this debate stem from intellectual disagreements that are no less sharp for being hard to see.

Some of these disagreements pit the value of gay male promiscuity against the dangers of HIV transmission. Others involve the struggle for authority between ivory-tower academics and market-savvy journalists. But perhaps the sharpest disagreement is over something called queer theory. Relatively new, queer theory represents a paradigm shift in the way some scholars are thinking about homosexuality. It proposes that traditional notions of lesbian and gay identity may be as confining as homophobia itself. Queer theory’s presiding spirit is Michel Foucault; its stars are Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler. But it was Michael Warner, now one of Sex Panic’s informal leaders, who in 1993 put together the anthology that crystallized queer theory as a movement: Fear of a Queer Planet (Minnesota). As Warner wrote in his introduction to that collection, queers don’t want “simple political interest-representation.” To liberalism’s offer to tolerate lesbians and gays as just another minority, queer theory says no. Instead, queer theory declares it opposes all identity pigeonholes on principle and aligns itself with anyone who troubles gender or sexual norms, including drag queens, transsexuals, and sex workers. According to Warner, the move from “gay” to “queer” is a radical change, representing “a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal.”

Though Sex Panic now tags them as “neoconservative,” gay reporters Gabriel Rotello and Michelangelo Signorile began their careers in good standing with the left. Both got their start at New York City’s legendary Outweek magazine, pioneer of a new, brasher, and more sophisticated gay journalism. Signorile headed ACT UP New York’s media committee from 1988 to 1990 and was one of four co-founders of the activist group Queer Nation. As the advance guard and lightning rod of the outing controversy, he was once praised by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick as “the Jacques Derrida of gossip,” a deconstructor of the closet. Rotello spent years writing angry articles about the politics of AIDS in what he calls a “guerrilla war against the pernicious agenda of blame.” He vehemently attacked Michael Fumento’s The Myth of Heterosexual AIDS, which labeled gays “the rats and fleas of the new plague.” Rotello could be speaking...
for both Signorile and himself when he writes that throughout most of his career “I not only followed the party line, I helped write it.”

The party line among gay activists in the early 1990s held that AIDS need not mean the end of gay sexual liberation. With condoms and a little versatility, gays could figure out “How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic,” as the title of a Douglas Crimp essay put it. But several years ago, that consensus on AIDS and gay sex started to disintegrate. Epidemiologists had long noted that despite aggressive campaigns to promote condoms, roughly a third of gay men continued to have unprotected anal sex. In a survey of predominantly sexually active gay men conducted in New York City between 1993 and 1995, for example, 32.1 percent of the HIV-negative men had unprotected receptive anal sex within the previous three months. For years, gays had managed to celebrate their successes in HIV prevention without confronting this stubborn remainder. But in late 1994, although the facts had not changed, the willingness of the gay community to talk about them had.

One catalyst was a Berkeley–based psychologist named Walt Odets. While counseling his uninfected patients, Odets uncovered a number of reasons a gay man might want to expose himself to HIV: guilt over surviving HIV-positive lovers and friends, fear of losing his emotional connection to them, envy of the support and respect accorded to people with AIDS, a wish to be punished for sexual desires that society had taught him to despise, and anxiety to be done with waiting for a seroconversion felt to be inevitable. More controversially, Odets felt that in some (rare) cases, a gay man in good mental health might decide that unprotected sex meant enough to be worth the risk. In conference papers and privately circulated essays that formed the basis of his 1995 book *In the Shadow of the Epidemic: Being HIV-Negative in the Age of AIDS* (Duke), Odets criticized the peppy and diffuse messages that HIV-prevention workers had glibly handed out with condoms. Almost single-handedly, Odets dismantled what he called “one of the truly grand fallacies of the epidemic: Gay men are doing just fine with safer sex, thank you very much.”

Odets is central to the Sex Panic debate. Although they’re on opposite sides of the fence, Signorile and Warner both cite Odets’s work to support their arguments. Not coincidentally, Signorile and Warner are also two of the best-known gay figures to confess to unsafe sex in print. In a September 1994 column for *Out* magazine, Signorile reported letting himself be fucked by a Navy officer—a “classic gay hunk: tall and masculine, with a buzzed haircut, razor-sharp cheekbones, a body of granite, and a Texas drawl.” In a January 1995 article for *The Village Voice*, Warner, then HIV-negative, reported a series of intoxicating unsafe encounters where “the quality of consciousness was...like impulse shoplifting.” Warner described how powerless he felt, writing that “my monster was in charge.”

The experience of unsafe sex challenged both men to come to new understandings of themselves. The journalist looked to the culture around him. Signorile began to criticize the unexamined gay hedonism that had encouraged him to
put a higher value on sex with a well-muscled Navy officer than on his own health. He wrote passionately, if somewhat sensationally, about the steroids, drugs, extravagant parties, and “body fascism” that he felt narrowed and crippled gay life.

The queer theorist, on the other hand, looked inward, to the unruly and asocial force within him that wanted to be unsafe. Struggling to articulate a new, distinctively queer approach to HIV prevention, Warner warned AIDS educators that “the appeal of queer sex, for many, lies in its ability to violate the responsibilizing frames of good, right-thinking people.” While Signorile urged gay men to reform their sexual ethics, taking the feminist attempt to reform straight men in the 1970s as a model, Warner argued that sex between men, as a queer act, would always escape if not defy ethical systems. At the very least, a queer effort at HIV prevention would have to resist concealing unconventional or self-destructive sexual desires under a moral prohibition.

Meanwhile, Rotello’s journalism had undergone a sea change. He had come to believe that, although his old enemy Fumento had been homophobic, what he had predicted was turning out to be true: In America, gays were offering HIV an ecological niche that non-drug-injecting heterosexuals did not and probably would never offer. When a bathhouse called the West Side Club opened in New York City in January 1995—the first in over a decade—Rotello attacked, calling it “a bathhouse like the legendary bathhouses of old, those bustling hives of contagion that helped spread death throughout the gay male world.” Rotello and a new group, Gay and Lesbian HIV Prevention Activists (GALHPA), insisted that any sex club that condoned behavior riskier than voyeurism and mutual masturbation should be shut. In their zeal, GALHPA (although not Rotello personally) met with city officials and broke one of the most solemn taboos of gay activism: They asked the government to intervene. Health officials agreed that more careful monitoring of sex clubs was warranted. According to the local newspaper LGNY, in 1995 the city made nearly fourteen hundred separate inspections of between forty and fifty establishments, issued warnings to thirty, and shut down nine.

GALHPA’s actions infuriated Warner and many other activists, who suspected Rotello of hiding a hostility to sex inside the Trojan horse of a public health campaign. According to Warner, Rotello’s attack on the sex clubs mis-took gay culture’s innovative, nonstandard forms of sexual intimacy for “a pathological, instinct-driven, thoughtless, reductive animality.” Sex clubs, stranger is like a metonym.”

To counter GALHPA’s activities, Warner started an organization of his own: the AIDS Prevention Action League (APAL), a precursor to Sex Panic. Both groups petered out as the issue dropped from news coverage, but one legacy of the 1995 debate was that a group of prominent academics realized that the state regulation of public sex was an activity they wanted to oppose.

QUEER theorists take as a founding principle the counterintuitive suggestion that Foucault made at the conclusion of the first volume of his History of Sexuality: “The rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasures.” According to Foucault, lesbians and gays would not be liberated if they affirmed that their sexual desires defined their identities; they would only be further inveigled into a way of thinking that labeled and policed them. Instead, Foucault suggested, all people, whether classed as homosexual or heterosexual,
ation. His first book, *The Letters of the Republic* (Harvard), explored the cultural meanings of print in colonial America’s emerging public sphere. The subject was Habermasian, not even remotely homosexual—and that remoteness seems to be what incited Warner to edit *Fear of a Queer Planet*. Lesbian and gay studies, he felt, had been examining subjective and aesthetic angles to the exclusion of social ones. And social theory had been taking heterosexuality for granted. Queerness offered a way to rethink both the social realm and the place of homosexuality within it.

But when queer theory investigated the social, it discovered that almost the only thing all lesbians and gays have in common is a memory of noncommunity. Queers, Warner declared, are “a kind of social group fundamentally unlike others” because, unlike most members of a race, ethnicity, or gender, individual queers spend their childhoods in isolation, sometimes even hating the group they will later identify with. For Warner, the shared queer experience of not belonging is not merely a wound or defect but an under-appreciated political force: He celebrates it as “an objection to the normalization of behavior in [a] broad sense.”

Queer theory yields a politics very different from that of traditional lesbian and gay identity. To visualize the difference, it might help to borrow an image from Gayle Rubin’s essay “Thinking Sex.” Imagine that society controls and defines sex by drawing a “charmed circle” around it. Inside the charmed circle are all the good and normal kinds of sex—for example, married, heterosexual, monogamous. Outside are all the bad and unhealthy kinds, such as promiscuous, sadomasochistic, for money. For the last half century, homosexuality has been a disputed border territory, half in, half out. If the goal of lesbian and gay politics is to bring homosexuality inside Rubin’s charmed circle, then the goal of queer politics is quite different—to abolish the circle altogether or, where this seems impossibly utopian, to remain outside the circle as an act of protest.

As an issue that draws out the antagonisms between lesbian and gay identity and its queer critique, public sex—in clubs, parks, or restrooms—is exemplary. Sex Panic’s willingness to shelter almost any kind of nonstandard sexual behavior under its umbrella confounds a traditional gay activist like Signorile. “I think most people who’ve come out of the closet don’t have a lot of concern over the business they have in who they can have sex with,” he says. “But when queer theory invesuments come along and say, ‘If I were to get themselves as homosexual and can therefore be engaged in dialogue and changed and mobilized politically by the gay culture.

In the language of queer theory, Signorile speaks a “minoritizing discourse,” a term coined by Sedgwick in *Epistemology of the Closet*. For him, gay identity defines a subset of the population, and closet cases are deserters in this minority’s battle for recognition. Warner and Sex Panic, on the other hand, speak what Sedgwick calls a “universalizing discourse.” They see what married men do in tearooms as their business because they feel that disowned, deviant desires affect everyone in society, even (or perhaps, especially) those who do not admit or act on them.

Queer theory’s taste for public sex and its distaste for community norms are both evident in *Policing Public Sex: Queer Politics and the Future of AIDS Activism* (South End Press, 1996). Released in the wake of the 1995 GALHPA-APAL wars, the anthology was edited by Dangerous Bedfellows, a collective of NYU graduate students. “We are focusing on acts rather than identities,” the collective declares in the introduction, sounding a distinctly queer note. Along with analytic essays, *Policing* includes interviews with sex-club owners, transcripts of legal documents, Odets on HIV prevention, and Bérubé on the history of bathhouses.

The book also contains evidence of queer theory’s troubled relation to ethics. The editors’ desire to “screw with the notion of a totalizing queer leadership class or gay ‘community’” lets in voices that are radically free of any tribal or group affiliation. But in politics, as opposed to literary criticism, it can be unsettling to listen to a voice unconstrained by responsibility to a community. Between the same covers, Odets’s chapter on HIV prevention lies uneasily with the essay by the HIV-positive former porn star Scott O’Hara, who writes, “The life of a Negative, at this point in our history, seems to me to be the most irrelevant and pointless of positions,” and who applauds the attractive “strong personality” of a friend who intentionally got himself infected. And it is not reassuring to hear the owner of the West Side Club both deny that what he runs is a sex club and say, “If I were to get AIDS today, it’s my own fucking fault. I deserve it”—apparently restricting the blame for infections that occur in his club to the decisions his clients make as individuals.

In places, the theoretical sophistication of *Policing* seems only a shade...
Odets tried to find out why a man might expose himself to HIV.

removed from old-fashioned rationalization. In an April 1994 Newsday article, for example, Rotello had described the unprotected anal intercourse that he witnessed in a sex club as a “sex murder/suicide.” Upset by his imagery, Dangerous Bedfellow Alison Redick analyzes Rotello’s text as follows:

Several false equations are at work in this account. First, the act—unprotected anal sex—is equated with the contraction of the virus, which is then equated with death. Not only is this an inaccurate set of conclusions, based on assumptions about the serostatus of the individuals engaged in the act, but the equation AIDS = Death produces a representation of the disease that is both dangerous to PWAs and complicit in homophobic reactions against the epidemic.

Rotello’s representation is alarmist, and Redick is correct to say he condenses probabilities into certainties. But anal sex without condoms is the most common way gay men become infected with HIV; seroprevalence among gay men in cities is widely estimated to be 50 percent; and although people infected with HIV may live for decades—especially now, thanks to new protease inhibitor treatments—they will not fall so long as even a small “core group” of gays continue to be highly promiscuous.

Rotello knew whom he was likely to anger most. “Gay culture’s very male view of sexual entitlement,” he writes, “has been intellectualized by gay academics in ways that would be considered scandalous if they were coming from straight men talking about women.” Then, in late May, as if to throw salt in the queers’ wounds, Larry Kramer praised Sexual Ecology in an editorial that excoriated gays for enshrining promiscuous sex at the center of their literature and culture. “Do we see Anna Karenina being fucked by her husband or her lover once, twice, a hundred times?” Kramer asked. “In her cunt, up her ass? Surely once, twice, a hundred times?” Kramer asked. “In her cunt, up her ass? Then being tied up and pissed upon? Surely gay culture is more than cocks.”

Queers struck back almost at once. Sex Panic was born in the apartment of Treatment Action Group staffer Gregg Gonsalves, after an April meeting of an HIV-positive support group that included Warner. “We had our support group,” Gonsalves says, “and at the end, it moved to talking about Gabriel Rotello’s new book, and we all got sort of exercised about it.”

“We were just sitting around and talking about how depressing it was that we kept hearing these stories about bars being closed,” says Warner. “And then we kept turning to the gay press, and instead of seeing coverage about this or resistance to it, we would see these reactionary screeds by Rotello and Signorile.”

Gonsalves recruited among grassroots activists, and Warner, along with art critic Douglas Crimp (whose boyfriend, Damien Jack, is a member of the same support group), recruited scholars. About fifty people showed up at the first Sex Panic organizational meeting in late May. Kendall Thomas, who teaches critical race theory at Columbia, suggested a teach-in as the group’s first event.

The involvement of Warner and Crimp would itself be reason enough to link Sex Panic to queer theory, but Warner spells out the connection explicitly. He points to the participation in Sex Panic of many who do not identify as lesbian or gay, ranging from straight men and married women to people allied with the transgender and female sex-worker communities. Says Warner, “We’re not simply advocating a redemptive gay identity and its acceptance by the mainstream.”

But how do you mobilize people to act politically for their desires? And what kind of politics emerges if you make the
Queerness, as Warner defines it, undermines a great deal. It opposes “not just the normal behavior of the social but the idea of normal behavior.” This might be wishful thinking—as charming and as unlikely to be realized as Godwinian anarchy—but queer theorists claim they take subversion as a principle, not a gesture. Queers want to rescue desires that have been disavowed by society, and as a matter of principle they refuse, while doing so, to judge or master them. But won’t the things queers discover on these missions of nonrecovery always appear as violations of the ethical system they resurface into? “We might even say,” Warner writes, “that queer politics opposes society itself.” Shouldn’t self-conscious queers, then, expect society to panic at the sight of them?

During the question-and-answer period after the teach-in, a man stood up to announce he was “what is known under Megan’s Law as a sexually dangerous predator,” jailed for four years for having sex with underage boys and now tracked by the police. He was met with a silence that was both stunned and respectful. In the history of lesbian and gay activism, sex with minors has often been the issue that forces new grassroots movements to decide what to include and what to exclude from their own charmed circles. This government-tagged sexual predator represents a question Sex Panic has not yet answered. No one in the room either seconded or reproached him. But he may yet force Sex Panic to choose between political viability and pure queerness.

At the very end of the evening, another man stood up and falteringly said that he felt the gay community’s celebration of multipartner sex made it more difficult for him to maintain an exclusive, long-term relationship. He was interrupted and heckled—the only instance of either behavior during the teach-in. Someone in the audience cattily suggested that the man join Sexual Compulsives Anonymous. As Kendall Thomas admitted at the time, the Sex Panic teach-in was a “frankly partisan gathering.” Still, it is odd that the side of this debate in favor of destigmatizing sexual desires cannot listen to a would-be monogamist as indifferent as to a convicted pedophile.

At first glance, it is hard to see why gay marriage and promiscuity cannot lie down together peaceably, the lambs beside the wolves. And in fact a peaceable kingdom is Sex Panic’s explicit position. “In order to be for a sexual culture,” says Warner, “you don’t have to be against intimacy or against couples or against commitment. It’s a false choice.” But at stake is a community norm, not individual choices. The fight to set that norm is a zero-sum game, even if individual decisions to respect, defy, or ignore it are not. Defenders of gay marriage certainly see it that way. As Rotello wrote in *The Nation*, “The core of the [queer] objection—that marriage would
provide status to those who married and implicitly penalize those who did not—seems essentially correct.” Or as Jonathan Rauch wrote in a *New Republic* essay that Warner likes to quote, “It is not enough... for gay people to say we want the right to marry. If we do not use it, shame on us.”

Queers may doubt and resist norms, but the ferocity of Sex Panic’s response suggests they too sense that on this question, only one side will win. Rauch’s use of the word shame “should really trouble anyone who has progressive politics and supports gay marriage,” Warner says. “It also shows that however liberal people like Rauch and Sullivan claim to be, they’re constantly abjecting a negative image of gay men who have sex.”

It may be that Sex Panic’s Catholic sex positivity is the group’s most valuable contribution to the debate over HIV prevention. Warner insists on understanding why some men have high-risk sex. “Moralizing may help us feel superior, but it’s not going to help them,” he says. “There’s a utopian longing behind almost all of these things that some people want to just dismiss. That’s what queer theory can bring to the discussion.”

At times, Rotello and Signorile suggest that merely to talk about the motives behind unsafe sex is tantamount to approval. In *Sexual Ecology*, for example, Rotello wrote, “If gay men begin to make a virtue of confessing that they don’t always have safer sex...won’t that create a new community norm in which unsafe sex is acceptable?” Rotello now says that if he could make only one revision to *Sexual Ecology*, he would clarify that he is in favor of men talking about why they have unsafe sex—if their goal is to get community support not to have unsafe sex in the future. But it is also true that against Odets’s sympathetic depth psychology of sexual risk takers Rotello’s book pits a dismissive list of the “justifications and excuses” gay men use when asked why they have unsafe sex.

**EVERY** Thursday night at eight o’clock, Sex Panic meets at the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center. The only structure to the meetings is a ring of chairs and a pair of co-facilitators, who change weekly. When I visited, the group was planning two September events: a second teach-in, this time at the NYU law school, and a historical slide show by Bérubé that would double as a protest against a new curfew on the West Village piers—a curfew that Sex Panic says is being selectively enforced against young queers of color.

How effective is Sex Panic as a political force? “Controversy is the tool [we] have right now,” Bérubé says. “We make a little disturbance so people notice there are other voices.” When university professors stand up to defend public sex, people pay attention. But although they drew a sizable audience, Sex Panic lost its first scrimmage against Rotello and Signorile with a fumble.

Key to the message of Sex Panic’s first teach-in was its urgency. “Not since Stonewall have we faced so much harassment,” their flyer read. Sex Panic’s claim of a shutdown stood on two legs. First, according to the Anti-Violence Project, more gay men were reporting that the police had arrested them for public lewdness than in previous years. Second, the city had recently closed a number of gay bars and clubs. For Sex Panic, these two phenomena were linked. At the teach-in, Maura Bairley of AVP accused authorities of “smoking gay and lesbian people out of the clubs, onto the streets, and into the jails.”

Unfortunately, no one in Sex Panic had researched either claim thoroughly. When pressed by *LGNY*, AVP, to its credit, offered hard numbers. Comparing
its data on the first six months of 1997 to its data on the first six months of 1996, the organization reported a 61 percent rise in arrests for public lewdness. But the raw numbers AVP released were less impressive: Eighteen arrests were reported to the group during the first half of 1996, twenty-nine during the first half of 1997. Scattered over half a year, eleven additional arrests in New York City looked like something less than a crackdown.

Rotello and LGNY editor Paul Schindler also dissected the club closings Sex Panic had lumped together. Several had been closed under charges of drug trafficking—for example, those owned by Peter Gatien, a mogul of straight as well as gay nightlife. Others were shut for failing to have the cabaret license required by New York City law to permit dancing—an expensive legal hurdle but one that many gay clubs meet. Again, the monolithic image of oppression targeted at gays seemed to crumble.

In Chelsea, the current roost of New York City’s itinerant homosexual community, a new boutique, café, or bar for lesbians and gays seems to open every month. The West Side Club that so angered Rotello in 1995 is still in business. Furthermore, as Rotello notes, “the current edition of Homo Xtra lists thirty-six advertised venues where gay men can ‘get off’ in commercial sex establishments in New York.”

If Sex Panic has not been crying wolf, its members need to explain why. They point to 1995, when the city closed many adult theaters because agitation by Rotello and GALHPA had brought higher surveillance, as documented in the Policing anthology. But as LGNY’s Duncan Osborne has reported, since January 1997 New York’s health department has issued only one warning and closed only one establishment—and that temporarily—which suggests that the panic in question may already be over.

Warner responds to LGNY’s coverage by spinning it. Rotello, he points out, has moderated his once-strident language. “Compare Rotello’s rhetoric now with his tabloid columns a couple of years ago,” Warner says. “He seems to have realized that he is in danger of losing support in the middle.... The rightward slide of the debate has been slowed.”

Duggan offers a more provocative answer. She points out that when clubs closed in the 1950s no public official admitted to a coordinated crackdown. “It is correct that there is no conspiracy,” Duggan writes by e-mail, hypothesizing that instead there is an uncoordinated trend caused by larger forces, which are also squelching public spaces for debate and expression nationwide by defunding the National Endowment for the Arts and corporatizing large portions of public life. The city’s sanitizing of Times Square for Disney, she feels, is emblematic of this process.

Against the press’s steady salvo of facts, Sex Panic fires back with interpretations. It is a tactical mistake that academics in the humanities often make when attacked by journalists; to say Rotello’s discourse
Queer theory opposes all identity pigeonholes on principle and is homophobic or sex negative does not answer his claims about the epidemiology of AIDS. As Rotello retorted to a Sex Panic letter writer, “No honest, nonjudgmental discussion of how AIDS happened to gay men, or how it could be contained, should be ruled off the table because to gay men, or how it could be contained, mental discussion of how AIDS happened to gay men, or how it could be contained, Rotello wanted to regulate sexual behavior but had not spelled out how to reconcile that goal with individual freedoms. He found some of Rotello’s generalizations—about “the ageless lessons of social cohesion,” for example, or the thing that Warner is saying.” Nonetheless, Duberman describes Rotello’s book to me as “a conscientious and caring attempt to deal with what seems to be a real problem.” But he is nearly alone among scholars in judging Rotello’s approach to be “genuine and...worthy of respect.”

While I was working on this article, a friend told me a story that helped to distill the real problem that has split the journalists and the Sex Panic scholars.
(He said the story was true, but it might be urban legend; think of it as a thought experiment.) Bob has sex from time to time with Adam; they aren’t boyfriends. Adam is HIV-positive, something Bob and Adam both know. Together, one evening, they pick up a third man, Chris. Bob knows that Chris is HIV-negative and that Chris does not know Adam’s serostatus. While the three are in bed together, Adam starts to fuck Chris without a condom. This makes Bob anxious, but he does not say anything to stop it.

As a puzzle, the story has several easy and unsatisfactory solutions: Adam is evil, Bob is a coward, or Chris is an idiot. Probably most gay men today would choose the third solution—in part to ward off consideration of the other two, like the owner of the West Side Club when he said, “If I were to get AIDS today, it’s my own fucking fault.” However, what interests me about the story is not any single answer but the fact that as casually as it tumbles three men into one bed it turns gay sex into a conversation about ethics. No matter how traditional the coupling may look, there are never just two men involved when gays have sex. This is what makes anonymous queer sex utopian and metonymic for Warner and what makes monogamous gay sex ecological and responsible for Rotello.

It may be that queer theory has no questions to ask about the sex-act-cum-conversation in my friend’s anecdote. A theory that resists assembling acts into identities may not be able to help individuals trying to negotiate with one another. A theory that protects sexual acts from moral valences may not be able to help gays judge and adjust their sexual behavior or reward and punish their peers. Maybe queer theory as an enterprise senses that it will look promising only as long as it speaks from outside any tribe or community. Or maybe queer theory has to stay outside by definition. But debates over ethics are always fought inside, where close quarters give the tribe’s members daily evidence that people are limited, disappointed, and compromised. If queer theory stays too enraged to join this conversation, it will never be guilty of taming or trapping sex. It will always be able to point out another way of organizing sex, or not organizing it, that would be more free. It will always be able to take an ambiguous comfort in the fact that present-day sex is not the utopia it might be. But then queer theory will be only academic.

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