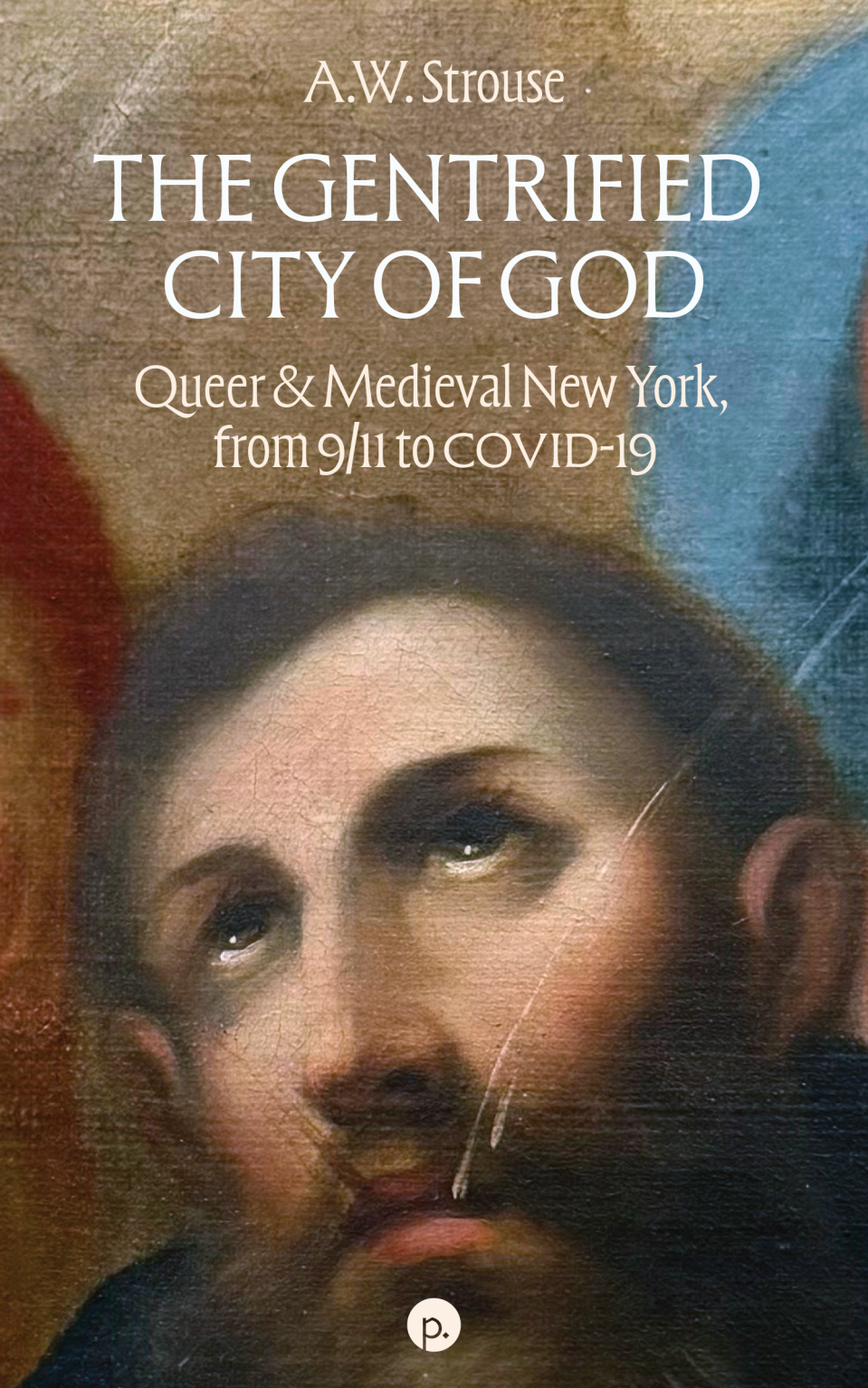
A.W. Strouse

THE GENTRIFIED CITY OF GOD

Queer & Medieval New York, from 9/11 to COVID-19



THE GENTRIFIED CITY OF GOD

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Fig. 1. Detail from Hieronymus Bosch, *Ship of Fools* (1490–1500)

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spontaneous acts of scholarly combustion



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For Teena Peters, *in memoriam*

I am a good deal surprised to find a child of mine expressing sympathy with mediævalism in any form.

—Oscar Wilde, "The Canterville Ghost"

INTRODUCTION

Sexless and the Secular City

It's 2019, and I've got what I think is a brilliant idea for a book. It's going to be a little monograph about what I want to call "queer medievalisms."

In my queer medievalisms folder, I file a handful of contemporary, queer and trans artists whose work borrows from the Catholic Middle Ages. These artists include: painter Kehinde Wiley, poet Miller Oberman, and musician Blood Orange.

I feel a special kinship with how these artists are all my fellow New Yorkers. And I'm inspired, as well, because I'm just in the midst of converting to Catholicism.

But my own conversion, I think, isn't going to be part of this book. It's not something I really want to get into, especially because some of my queer friends are giving me a lot of flak. They seem to feel that I'm betraying them by joining a religion that they associate with repression and abuse.

I tell myself that, by becoming Catholic, I'm joining a great, gay tradition that includes queer, Catholic New Yorkers like W.H. Auden and Andy Warhol. And I tell myself that my book about queer medievalisms is going to be an upbeat story about how medieval tropes can serve as resources in the fight against racist, cis-hetero-patriarchal capitalism.

But as I'm trying to write the book, I fall into a spiritual crisis.

* * *

My alarm goes off before dawn. I'm jogging around Brooklyn under the elevated train. In front of a fleabag motel, three trans women loiter on the street corner. We wish one another good morning as I run past, my lungs aching. Dissonantly, a larger-than-life poster of Donald Trump is staring down at us from the façade of the motel. I feel like I'm in one of those medieval personification allegory poems, where a lonely pilgrim is wandering through a landscape overloaded with symbolism.

* * *

My crisis is caused by my toxic relationship with New York City, where I eke out a living as a gay, part-time professor of medieval lit while trying to write the books I want to write. To pay rent, I'm working myself mad. I teach five courses per semester at three different universities, all around Manhattan.

I tell myself that working as an adjunct prof is better than toiling as a coalminer like my folks back in Appalachia. But since most of my income goes to paying my student loans, it feels like I'm working at the company store.

* * *

I head home to shower, and I spend a few hours writing before I hop on the subway. I try to keep my dignity by seeking out cheap thrills, and by making time to write my book on queer medievalisms, which, I tell myself, is going to be a bestseller.

At West 59th Street, I push my way out of a crammed subway car. I exit the station through a revolving glass door, which leads directly into the basement of Bloomingdale's. I've never shopped at Bloomingdale's, but every morning I pop into the Bloomingdale's men's room, which is next to the suits and ties. At the urinals, I stand shoulder to shoulder with bankers, hus-

tlers, baristas, crackheads, employees — everybody jerking off together before the start of the workday.

A Bloomingdale's employee enters, and I start to make a break for it, but he grabs his package and winks.

* * *

I hurry along Lexington to the Church of St. Vincent Ferrer. Here, famously, Andy Warhol attended Mass every morning.

Candlelight flickers against the shadows of the Gothic traceries, and the stained glass windows start to gleam like jewels. I cross myself and kneel before an icon of the Blessed Virgin.

It's not that I feel guilty about jerking off at Bloomingdale's. On the contrary, I don't see my cruising and my devotion as necessarily in conflict. Both are strategies for trying to make my workaday life feel meaningful.

* * *

Up the street, I teach a course on *The Canterbury Tales* at Hunter College. The classroom is inside of a Tudor gothic castle, which is bizarrely set against looming modern apartment buildings.

The castle is full of rats. Sometimes, a rat will run under my students' feet during class. In the winter, freezing wind pours into the class through the broken windows.

My students are pissed. Of the twenty-five students in the class, they hail from twenty-five different countries, and they sit in a circle and gripe and grouse that nearly all of the *Tales* make gross jokes about sexual assault.

Personally, I prefer Chaucer's other poems, and I feel that the English Department has set me up for failure. The course catalogue, created by full-time faculty, still clings to an outdated canon. But it's time for me to run across Central Park.

* * *

This time of day, there's no sex in the Park, and over on the West Side, I teach freshmen composition at Fordham's Lincoln Center campus.

Frankly, the Bronx campus is prettier: Fordham's Bronx campus is designed in a collegiate gothic, medievalist style. In Manhattan, the Lincoln Center campus — built on the ruins of a Puerto Rican ghetto destroyed by Robert Moses — is just beige boxes.

The students are also beige. They're mild-mannered, middle class, all from the suburbs. They never give me a hard time, and if I had a minute, I'd try to teach them to be rebellious, but I need to head downtown.

* * *

At The New School, I teach a lecture on Western Civilization, followed by a seminar on Saint Augustine. My students here are all trans-nonbinary communists. They resent being required to take these old-fashioned courses, which some dean dictated before he transferred back to Yale.

My students rightly point out that Augustine is self-absorbed and that *The Confessions* depict everyone as a one-dimensional prop in the service of Augustine's moral fable. When they ask to make memes for their finals, instead of writing essays, I figure that it will save me some paperwork.

* * *

During my lunch break, I like to hang around the Village. In warmer weather, I eat my Tupperware of lentils on a bench at the AIDS Memorial, which is an insipid tangle of beige metal that looks like it was made by IKEA.

Some days, I listen to an organist play Bach fugues at the Grace Church on Broadway, which always fills me with existential terror. I feel happy whenever I run into Miller Oberman, a fellow queer medievalist who also teaches at The New School. Once or twice, I even catch sight of Blood Orange hanging

around Washington Square. There are rumors about Kehinde Wiley; but I've never met him, and I'm not his type anyway.

* * *

For a few hours every day, I sit and write in the NYU library. It's a giant tower with an empty, twelve-story atrium that feels like a black hole and fills me with dread.

In the NYU library, I must be careful not to fall into temptation where undergrads cruise in the restrooms. NYU is one of the few schools where I don't teach (because, for some reason, the motherfuckers won't hire me). So, technically, I could have a tryst with an NYU student without feeling ethically compromised. But everyone's heard about Avital at this point, and I'm taking enough liberties as it is.

* * *

By early evening, the subway is less crowded, and I head back uptown — making my customary rounds at Bloomingdale's and at St. Vincent Ferrer's — and then I return to Hunter.

I teach my last course of the day on *Beowulf*. At this hour, it feels relaxing to recite Old English elegies, and there's something charming about the ruins of the rat-filled castle, which is perfectly suited to my part-time medievalism.

* * *

Late at night, I arrive back in Brooklyn and eat some more lentils. Sitting down at my writing desk, I gaze out the window of my second-floor apartment. I shudder. The streetscape is taking a swift turn, from decay to decadence.

Many of the buildings in my neighborhood are still boarded up from a riot back in 1977. For many years, I'm the only white guy on my block. Each month, I pay my rent in cash to the landlady who lives downstairs. On Sundays, I attend Mass in Spanish with my Dominican neighbors.

I live on the second floor of a one-family house. My apartment is run-down, with moldy drop ceilings and fake wood paneling. It looks like the set of a vintage porno film. But it's affordable, and I believe that it realizes my life-long dream of being a bohemian gay writer in New York.

But suddenly, like in a Jordan Peele movie, the neighborhood transforms into a nearly identical, zombie copy of itself. Overnight, construction workers begin gut renovating every other building on the block. Contractors fill high the dumpsters with fuzzy pink insulation and dank, faux wood paneling. The neighborhood's single-family homes are remodeled, divided into tiny apartments. Nearly all of my poor and working-class neighbors disappear and are replaced, as if by pod people.

The area's white population metastasizes (from 3% to 20%). And these interlopers take the places of long-term, Black and Hispanic residents.[1]

Once a week, real-estate agents ring the bell. They assume that I'm the owner of the house, and they make me offers. I tear up their business cards, afraid that my landlady will decide to sell.

From my vantage as a queer medievalist, I also notice the conflux of several disturbing trends — trends that aren't usually conceptualized together, but which inspire me to conjecture that gentrification is a spiritual condition — shot through with queer medievalisms.

* * *

By now, most people have heard of the "food desert." But New York is also turning into a "sex desert." Gentrification has steadily dismantled the city's sexual infrastructure. A series of right-wing mayors have destroyed nearly all of the city's gay sex clubs, buddy booths, bathhouses, and porno theaters. I'm still able to squeeze in a few minutes of pleasure at Bloomingdale's, but the heydays of New York's public gay sex culture are long gone, and

1 See Akerele et al., *State of New York City's Housing.*

major papers like the *Post* and *Atlantic* report that the percentage of New Yorkers not having sex is at a record high.[2]

I notice a striking change in the cruising around my neighborhood. When I first moved in, I could usually pick up guys in the dairy aisle of C-Town, or under that railroad overpass next to the graveyard. But an influx of white yuppies is flooding into the area, and they all keep their eyes glued to their iPhones.

Related to this, care for the body is being privatized. In the last ten years, the city has closed down sixteen community hospitals, and lost 20,000 hospital beds. Now, medical services are tightly concentrated in the wealthiest parts of Manhattan.[3]

At the same time, the Catholic Church is undergoing its own kind of gentrification. In a downsizing effort, the Church shutters dozens of parishes throughout the city and eliminates many charitable organizations like schools and hospitals.[4]

Former churches turn into hot commodities.[5] Just down the street from my place, developers demolish a church. They retain the old Gothic façade, which now adorns a shiny luxury building filled with hipsters in skinny jeans.

* * *

A block away, the local Catholic school converts into a charter school. One of my friends teaches there and gripes about the corporatization of the curriculum. Workers in yellow helmets tear down a statue of the Virgin. They use a crane to smash apart her shrine.

---

2 See Ingraham, "Share of Americans Not Having Sex," and Julian, "Why Are Young People Having So Little Sex?"

3 See Lewis, "'Beds Not Bodybags.'"

4 Schlossberg, "Catholic Church Closings," and Kim, "Outraged by Property Sales."

5 See Chiu, "Sacred Homes"; Vecsey, "For Sale"; Shanahan, "We're Praying to Live"; and Polsky, "16 Religious Buildings." See also Lipka, "Number of U.S. Catholics Has Grown," and Archdiocese of New York, "Making All Things New."

Mother Mary is banished from the hood. And so, too, are banished those other Marys — the two elderly, bickering queens who used to live across the street from me with their nine bickering Pomeranians.

While the Church is contributing to the soul-deadening process of gentrification, counterintuitively, the Church is also becoming a spiritual refuge for hipsters like me.

* * *

At the NYU library, I reread *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* by Max Weber. Weber argues that capitalism emerged through the religious ethic of austere puritans.

As I watch how gentrification destroys public sex, and destroys churches and hospitals, I begin to see gentrification as a puritanical discipline — a spatial formation that tries to expunge sin and salvation from urban space.

* * *

At the same time, I start to regret my decision to convert to Catholicism. The *Times* and other outlets report that, in New York, college-educated people are joining the Church in droves. Catholicism is the fastest growing religion among the gentrifying classes.[6]

Traddy Catholics become known as the "Dimes Square" crowd.[7] One of my closest friends, Stephen, is a fellow scholar and a gay convert to Catholicism, and he attends Latin Mass with the same affectation that hipsters cling to vinyl records. His reasons for converting aren't quite clear to me. And more famous converts to Catholicism include right-wing luminaries like JD Vance and Sohrab Ahmari, along with the bestselling anti-gay writer Rod Dreher (who later converts harder to Greek Orthodoxy).

6 Bottum, *An Anxious Age.*

7 Yost, "New York's Hottest Club Is the Catholic Church."

Like gentrifiers, these bros try to buy low and sell high. They move into the Church like they're moving into an unfashionable and cheap ethnic enclave. And then they try to flip it for an ideological profit, citing medieval theology to buttress their right-wing politics.

Soon I find out that Stephen has been working as a full-blown, fascist propagandist (and publishing vicious lies about queer and trans peoples).

For a week, I'm sick to my stomach. And — hipster's worst nightmare — I'm saddened by the realization that, in seeking out a rarefied, alternative lifestyle, I've accidentally jumped on a reactionary bandwagon.

* * *

I realize that I'm going to need to revise my initial, hopeful thesis about queer medievalisms.

My book about queer medievalisms will need to try to theorize how medievalism intersects with sex, spirituality, and gentrification.

Turning back to my initial examples of the queer medieval, I decide to take seriously how artists like Wiley, Oberman, and Blood Orange are fellow New Yorkers, embedded in a gentrifying landscape.

I need to account for the ways that my desire to write a study of queer medievalisms are caught up in the contradictions of gentrification.

And I need to factor in how the Church is using medievalism to paper over its sinister development schemes and its collusion with the far right.

And I want to think about how academia deploys medieval tropes like Gothic architecture and requires courses on Chaucer, while driving gentrification.

It looks like I'm not going to be able to quickly churn out a bestselling monograph. Instead, I wrack my brain for a literary form that can accommodate a moral inquiry into sex, religion, race, medievalism, and urban space.

* * *

I try to keep my sophomores engaged by pleading that Augustine was a queer person of color, and bisexual, and a polemicist against empire.[8] But the students are right. Augustine is self-involved and moralistic. There's no denying that *The Confessions* is a wonky read, and the narrative gets bogged down by too much theological speculation.

Still, I get a kick out of how, in *The Confessions,* Augustine interprets teenage erections and breastfeeding as vehicles of divinity.[9] I also love how in *The City of God* he defends trans and nonbinary people, and he takes a hard line against inhumane governments.[10] I admire how in *The Retractions* he obsessively indexes all of the things that he regrets having written in his earlier books.

But what inspires me the most about Augustine is how he investigates the moral consequences of cities, through the lens of his own messy and wayward and kinky experiences — even foregrounding his own foibles and contradictions.

So I assume, like Augustine, that there's value in sharing my perspective, even when I'm wrong, and even if I'll recant my opinions later.

Of course, like everybody else, I've read Michel Foucault, and I'm skeptical about the compulsion for gay people to produce confessional discourses. I'm also aware, however, that Foucault saw Augustine's form of confession as especially intriguing — and distinct from modern forms of confession — because of how Augustine situates the embodied self in an eroticized landscape, where the earthly city is a heuristic for grasping the transcendent.

My idea, then, is to write this book as an experiment in what might be called Augustinian auto-exegesis — an attempt to

8 See Soble, "Correcting Some Misconceptions about St. Augustine's Sex Life."

9 Augustine, *Confessions,* I.7 and II.6.

10 Augustine, *The City of God,* XVI.

grapple with the spiritual and sexual stakes of urban space — by unpacking my own interpretations of New York's architecture and art, and poetry and public policy, as I saw the city's uneven development discipline the body and soul, at a queer intersection with the medieval. Like all experiments, this one might very well fail. And as in Augustine, my narrative might not gel; I might tend to treat other people more as moral allegories than as flesh-and-blood characters; my motives might be compromised by my desire to be canonized; and I might, in the end, assume the prerogative to recant everything in a final retraction.

PRELUDE

A Land of Whores and Lepers

My parents call our hometown in Appalachia "God's country." On the porch swing, they stare stoically across the cornfields and shake their heads. They lament the sin and elitism of what they call "Jew York."

Later, I will remove the word "parents" from my vocabulary, and I'll refer to these people as the monsters who happened to be my legal guardians. As Karl Marx pointed out, the term "family" comes from the Latin "familia," which means all of the slaves in a man's household, including his wife and children, who were his property and whom he had the legal right to kill.

* * *

Augustine, following Plato, sees the city as an allegory. He reads the urban landscape as a moral map and set of symbols for the destiny of his soul. But whereas Plato builds his political philosophy by extrapolating out from the level of the individual, and up to the level of the republic, Augustine focuses on the personal and turns inward. Augustine lives both in what he calls the City of Man and in the City of God. For him, the city on earth

means doubly: It has its own immanent meaning, and it stands as an allegorical portent of the heavenly city.

* * *

My experience of the city begins long before I live in the city. Throughout my childhood in Appalachia, I receive images of New York. New York is depicted on film and represented in literature. And I hear about the city whose "liberal elitists" are a constant point of reference in political discourse. The city is always, therefore, for me, a virtual city.

* * *

When I'm eight years old, I ask Santa Claus for books. Under the tree, I find a gun. A .22 rifle, decorated with a red bow.

I'm memorizing Bible verses in Sunday school, so I recall the words of the Lord: "Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone?" (Matthew 7:9).

* * *

We live like we're on *Little House on the Prairie,* pretending that we're still colonizing the frontier.

All spring long, I'm felling trees and splitting logs for firewood. Throughout the summer, I dig trenches, trowel cement, lay bricks. The fall is time to harvest the crops and preserve fruits and vegetables in Mason jars, stocking up for winter when I'll kill squirrels and deer with my Christmas gun.

My father says that I have no right to eat unless I work. He tells me every day that he hates me, wishes I were never born, and that no one will ever love me because I'm such a weirdo and a fag. Reading and writing, he says, are for sissies, and I need to toughen up and get ready to join the Army.

When I listen to Bob Dylan sing, "Positively Fourth Street," he screams, "What's wrong with these kids today?" When I listen to Liza sing "New York, New York," he smashes my stereo.

* * *

Every year after Christmas dinner, we watch *A Christmas Story*. It's about a sweet little white boy who desperately wants a gun for Christmas.

The adults keep telling me, "You're just like him!"

I follow my dad out back of the house and do some target practice with my new gun. I shoot at the rusted-out oil drum that we use to burn the trash. I'm actually a pretty good shot.

* * *

I read books in secret, and I picture New York as the incarnation of a carnal, spiritual mystery — a land of whores and lepers, a space that conflates ethno-religious difference with gay sex and AIDS. I imagine the city as a Jewish twink — like Christ, rail-thin on the Cross, whose love I long for, and whose judgment I fear.

* * *

Whenever we burn books, it's not political. It's just that the leader of my Boy Scout troop has found a load of free books at a yard sale.

The Boy Scout troop meets every Wednesday night in a cinderblock building that's heated in the winter by a woodstove. The books make good kindling.

Most of the books are Harlequins and Jane Fonda workout manuals. But I save a collection of poems by Edna St. Vincent Millay.

* * *

Next up on the TV is *Home Alone 2: Lost in New York*. It's another Christmas movie about a sweet little white boy who's obsessed with killing and maiming.

"You're just like Kevin," the adults keep saying.

At this point, everyone knows perfectly well that I'm not like Kevin; I'm more like the character in *Home Alone 2* who's played by Tim Curry, the flamboyant concierge at the Plaza Hotel.

Donald Trump makes a cameo, but the real villain in *Home Alone* is Kevin.

Kevin torments Tim Curry, because Kevin is a spoiled rich bully from the suburbs. Kevin is like a prepubescent Dirty Harry, always trying to inflict vigilante justice on New York City's underclasses.

Kevin's nemeses, the burglars Marv and Harry, are clearly coded as ethnic others. A Wop and a Jew.

Kevin mercilessly tortures Marv and Harry, just like he did last Christmas.

The fact that the movie stages this story of vigilante violence at Christmas time makes it all the more cynical.

Apparently, Kevin misses his family, which I can't understand at all.

I want nothing more than to be alone on Christmas, to run away from my horrible parents and their guns.

If I were in New York, I'd be running around with Tim Curry and Marv and Harry.

* * *

Throughout my childhood, the far-right persistently associates New York City with AIDS and persistently declares that AIDS is divine punishment for sodomy. These discourses structure my erotic and religious appetites and frame how I see the city as a zone of death and resurrection, and, somehow, my salvation.

Gay activists often refer to the AIDS crisis as a holocaust, and gay artists often rework the iconography of the Crucifixion to represent HIV. Most famously in 1990, *LIFE* magazine's front cover presents an image that becomes the so-called "face of AIDS" — a photo of the emaciated David Kirby as Kirby dies in his father's arms. The image recalls the Pietà and suggests the sacrality of gay suffering.

* * *

In 2001, the Staten Island landfill is closed down, and New York City starts to ship its trash directly to my town, to a brand-new landfill.

The new landfill is on the side of a mountain, just above the bar where my mom works as a bartender.

Every day after school, I get off the yellow school bus at the bar. I sit at the bar for a while, until I'm reminded that it's illegal for minors to sit at the bar. Then, I go sit in a booth for an hour or two and read.

Truckers are delivering the garbage from New York. They stop at the bar, and they drink beer, and they hit on my mom. She gives me a quarter, and I put "Crazy" by Patsy Cline on the jukebox.

An older boy, whose mom is a waitress, teaches me how to play pool. He takes me out to the back of the bar. We sit on a fallen tree trunk that crosses over the creek, and he shows me how to smoke cigarettes.

* * *

Central Pennsylvania is populated by cults. All of our neighbors are the pasty white descendants of mean-spirited religious zealots who were kicked out of Europe for their extremism.

Many of my schoolmates believe that even Christmas is satanic.

The Amish, riding over the hills in their horse and buggies, look so quaint, but they condemn electricity as sinful.

And the founders of our town — genocidal Quakers — continue to prohibit the sale of alcohol within municipal limits.[1] The bar is just outside the town limits.

Since it's considered against God's law to name places for people, the creek behind the bar is called Little Fishing Creek.

1 On the history of genocide, slavery, and Protestant Christianity in colonial Pennsylvania, see Anonymous, "Movement for No Society."

Our town's only claim to fame is that, back in 1864, a bunch of rednecks tried to secede from the Union in an uprising known as the Fishing Creek Confederacy.

* * *

On September 14, 2001, the president stands at the still smoldering World Trade Center site.

He sermonizes about how God endows the world with an intrinsic "moral design."

From the wreckage, emergency crews find two busted beams in the shape of the Cross. It's taken as some kind of sign.

* * *

Every Sunday, I attend church in the First Methodist church. It's a white box with no adornments, only a pinewood cross. The Bible is the only real literature available to me, and it titillates me with its weird stories of incest and fratricide, and a Divinity who demands foreskins.

I read and reread those tales about the destruction of Sodom, about Jesus ministering to the crowds of ancient cities and palling around with whores and robbers.

* * *

Of course, I never cross paths with a real-life Jew or Catholic, or an out homosexual. I can only relate to religious and sexual difference by picturing scenes in the Bible, or by watching movies about New York.

By the time I'm a teenager, I decide that I'm going to escape to the city that *Annie Hall* calls the land of "Jewish, homosexual pornographers."

* * *

The first time that I see images of men naked is when I find my mother's family photo album in a dusty box in the attic.

The album holds black-and-white pictures of a US military base in West Berlin. There's my grandfather, Corporal Richard "Dick" Love, in full dress uniform. And there's my mom and my aunt as kids, with regulation buzzcuts.

Tucked into the back of the album, there's a souvenir pamphlet from their family vacation to Dachau.

Those horrific pictures of unclothed, walking skeletons catch my desperate, gay kid gaze with their desperate, typhoid eyes — and identify my attraction to the male body with religious persecution, with hell on earth, with living death.

* * *

The week after 9/11, my tenth-grade English teacher assigns an essay with the prompt, "What does it mean to be an American?"

Of course, I know that being an American means that no Jews or Blacks or Mexicans or homos are welcome to live in our rotten town, and that it's dangerous for me to let anyone know that I like to read, and that I'm forced to march around with a gun and burn books and told that it's my destiny to go off to Afghanistan to kill Muslims.

My teacher reports me to the high school principal, because I go overboard and use the word "fuck" in my essay. I call the principal a fascist, and he sentences me to three days of in-school suspension.

For three days, I sit in a room by myself next to the principal's office. I pass the time by reading Andy Warhol's *Diaries* and working on my novel. It's about a gay teenager who, like Warhol, leaves Pennsylvania for New York — where he decides to become a domestic terrorist.

* * *

When I finally pack my bags to attend college in Manhattan, my old man screams at me, "If you die of AIDS, then don't come home crying to me!"

I smirk because of the obviously illogical contradiction. He's enraged by my smugness and strangles me until I black out.

But I ship off nevertheless to the domain of the liberal elitists — fully indoctrinated into the perception of New York as Jewish, gay, and HIV positive.

PART I

A Pilgrimage of Conversion and Self-Discovery, or, Sex and God

At the start of the Fall 2004 semester, I arrive in New York, a wide-eyed, closeted freshman. Burdened by my fundamentalist upbringing, I see the city in terms of sex and in terms of God.

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My first afternoon in the Village, a merry band of trans women sweep me off to Washington Square Park where we share a joint. I gaze, totally stoned, through the park's iconic arch, and I recall the monument that the Emperor Titus built in Rome in the year 81 to commemorate the sacking of Jerusalem. Up Fifth Avenue, the glare of the sun reflects off of the Empire State Building. It's silver and sandy like a desert mirage. It's a larger-than-life, 102-story symbol of imperialism. I discern in the skyscraper a Babylonian ziggurat, and I fret for my soul.

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My first night in the city, I lose my virginity to a girl in my dorm.

In a few weeks, I'll learn about how sex is a rhetorical figure in the discursive deployment of sexuality, and I'll learn to problematize the concept of "virginity."

But for now, I'm troubled by the girl's ominous name, Ashley Burden.

Within a week, Ashley Burden sleeps with my roommate, and with three other guys on our floor, and with the R.A. Then she tells everyone that she has cancer and abruptly drops out.

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My Bible-thumping superego quakes with fear and loathing. But my tormented religiosity reflects wider cultural trends. This very week, the GOP is celebrating the anniversary of September 11 at its party convention in Madison Square Garden.

As Fran Lebowitz puts it, the country's "puritan background" has always regarded cities as "places of sin." But after 2001, Christian nationalists "take their revenge on New York" by colonizing it with their moralistic values.[1]

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In New York, there are more kids in my dorm than in my hometown. Most of them are ultra-wealthy and went to prestigious high schools; I'm accustomed to long and lonely walks in the woods, so I avoid the dorm kids and make friends with the buildings. I'm attached to the architecture of the Village. The streets are my companions. I feel a romantic and sexual attraction for the landscape.

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With my father's curse upon me, I begin cruising around the Village and studying at The New School — a university with a Leftist intellectual tradition, shaped by an influx of Jewish refu-

1 Lebowitz, "What Does Fran Lebowitz Really Think?"

gee scholars who, starting in 1933, fled Europe on visas sponsored by the school's University in Exile program.

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One block from the school, I walk by the fabled St. Vincent's Hospital, which is operated by the Sisters of Charity. Founded in 1849 during a cholera epidemic, St. Vincent's was, in the 1980s, the ground zero of the AIDS crisis. At the corner of 12th Street and Seventh Avenue, St. Vincent's registers a queer and Catholic history, entirely alien to my redneck Protestant worldview.

The hospital is a white brutalist box that seems to stare at me from a series of serrated, porthole windows. And there's a sooty brick tower, rusty like scabbed blood, which once contained the city's first and largest AIDS ward.

Street-side, the entrance to the Emergency Room looks, to me, like the gates of Dante's hell. It spews forth skeletal junkies, zombie derelicts, and shrieking prophets. Ambulances blare down the avenue. Orderlies trundle gurneys up the sidewalk.

Just across the street, in front of the Gay Men's Health Crisis headquarters, gaggles of queens in leather linger on the sidewalk, chatting and gossiping. The scene activates a deep-seated sense of myself as doomed to a painful early death, followed by eternal damnation.

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On 12th Street, the architecture of the The New School embodies the progressivist hope for a well-ordered future. The Modernist style aimed to express great and well-intended plans to improve the human condition. But now, these buildings look to me like a record of broken promises.

Designed in 1930 by Joseph Urban, The New School has an elegant façade. Its black, art deco lines run tightly parallel and connote the forward march of history. Inside, José Clemente Orozco's murals celebrate Lenin and Ghandi right alongside

one another, and assert the triumph of the historical-materialist struggle. The murals look, in retrospect, naïve.

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The school's architecture thrusts my lily-white Protestant superego into the ruptures of history. Inside The New School, the classrooms are made of all glass walls and enshrine a pedagogical spirit of democracy and transparency.

As I float in these giant fishbowls, I feel as if a disembodied gaze is staring into my conscience and threatening to pull me out of my closet and lay my soul bare.

Like the school's architecture, the school's curriculum, preoccupied with postmodernist theory, challenges my simplistic and puritanical notions of good and evil that I've brought with me from Appalachia.

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No one influences the school's curriculum more than its most famous luminary, Hannah Arendt. Arendt wrote her doctoral dissertation on "Love and Saint Augustine." Her philosophy examines how modernity throws a monkey wrench into Christian notions of morality.

Augustine postulated that evil simply doesn't exist. God is good, Augustine assumes; so, by definition, all of Creation is good.

Augustine defines evil, therefore, as just *relatively less good,* or as a lack of good.

But Arendt, in contrast, proposes that modernity produces radical evil — the evil of utterly destroying humanity itself.

Arendt's ideas about pedagogy also rework Augustine. Arendt theorizes education as "the point at which we decide whether we love the world" and therefore choose to negotiate between "the new against the old, the old against the new."[2] For

2 Arendt, *Between Past and Future,* 196.

Augustine, ethical life is the free choice of the individual will to *decide* to *love* — in a tense dialectic between what Augustine regards as the "old" and the "new" of Jewish law and Christian spirit.

These theological concerns overdetermine my relationship with New York. After all, the city's very name — bestowed by fanatical puritanical colonizers — implies the Christian appropriation of Judaism, and the quest to build a "New Jerusalem."[3]

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The New School is suffering an identity crisis and spends a million dollars on marketing consultants who rebrand the university.

Some of my classes take place in a dumpy, renovated department store on Fifth Avenue.

A year later it's decided that the rebranding campaign didn't work, so the university spends another million dollars on another marketing firm. They recommend demolishing the building on Fifth and expanding the university's real estate portfolio.

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The War on Terror, for me, provokes intense moral introspection, because the US is in the midst of a religious crusade against so-called Islamic terrorists.

Generally, Christian nationalists like my parents abhor New York as a veritable Sodom. But after 9/11, the city becomes a prop to facilitate right-wing warmongering, waterboarding, and rectal feeding.

Evangelical Christians like George W. Bush cite Augustine in order to gentrify New York, and Bush, as well as his opponents, code the city in medieval-theological terms. Throughout the War on Terror, Bush draws upon Augustine's so-called "just war" theory. Augustine's writings explain when war is justified.

3 See Procter-Smith, *Religion and Trade in New Netherland*.

And slyly, Bush deploys Augustine in order to bring Catholic voters into the Republican fold, and to provide some philosophical support to the otherwise anti-intellectual Evangelical movement.[4]

At the same time, liberal commentators challenge Bush by using many metaphors drawn from the Middle Ages. Bush's critics often characterize the Administration as "Manicheans" (referring to the cult that Augustine once belonged to, and then turned against and effectively eviscerated in his polemics). Major newspapers describe Bush's advocacy for torture as "medieval."[5] Muslims, too, are called "medieval," and Pope John Paul II argues that Bush's interpretation of Augustine amounts to a heresy.[6]

These medievalist-theological debates play out on the streetscape. I join the protestors outside Madison Square Garden, and I try to get my moral and geographic bearings. I struggle to memorize the subway map, to orient myself within Manhattan's street grid, to learn how to situate myself in a city reputed to be a den of iniquity but increasingly overrun by zealots.

I see the city's buildings and streets as determined by some mysterious "moral design." This design isn't always obvious and requires my close attention.

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Pundits keep emphasizing how the 9/11 hijackers studied architecture at the best European universities. They argue for interpreting 9/11 as an act of religiously motivated, architectural

4 Bottum, *An Anxious Age*.

5 See Hunt, "A Puritan on the Warpath"; Winters, "Cheney: Sinister to the End"; and Cornwell, "John Ashcroft: The Zealot Who Holds Bush's Future in His Hands."

6 Henneberger, "A Nation Challenged: The Vatican"; John Paul II, "Address of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to the Diplomatic Corps"; and Simpson, "Transcending Justice: Pope John Paul II and Just War."

criticism. Commentators sometimes also conjecture that Western education actually produces fundamentalism.

As I absorb these discourses, I feel uprooted. Moving away from college saves me from the homophobic abuse back home, but also causes immense culture shock. For many people, packing up and going off to university has come to take the place of the country's foundational, puritanical myth: the pilgrimage of conversion and self-discovery, of fleeing the old world for the new in order to find one's true self.

I try to make my way in New York's Slough of Despond.

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The scale of the city suggests superhuman portent. It's a realm of meaning, practically transcendent, and well beyond my tiny frame.

If only I stood as tall as the Statue of Liberty, I think, then the city would make sense, and then I could understand its geography in more human terms.

Americans are sentimental about the Statue of Liberty. But unlike the voluptuous depiction of Liberty by Delacroix, she looks stern and foreboding. She's a mean mother, patinaed green like the color of money. She has a manly, copper jaw and looks so sexless in her frumpy toga. Before her, in the crowds of the city, I can sense my basic meaninglessness.

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As I traipse around the city, I read into the streetscape and meditate upon 12th Street's convivial, Italian rowhouses. Across from The New School, one of these rowhouses protrudes rudely. Its façade juts out, at an off-kilter angle.

Current concerns about terrorism inspire interest in the history of the Weather Underground. Back in 1970, several Weathermen accidentally blew themselves up here.

History will regard the Weathermen as privileged demagogues (rich kids with connections). Their antics only succeed at waking up Dustin Hoffman, napping in the house next door.

Rebuilt after the explosion with a herky-jerky front, the building memorializes the awkward failures of the New Left, and corroborates the futility of protesting against Bush, who cynically says that he likes protests because they're the kind of democracy he wants to bring to Iraq.

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Freshman year, I enroll in a course on the Beatniks, my idols. I'm drawn to Ginsberg who said in his poem "America," "You made me want to be a saint," and to Kerouac, for how he somehow managed to see the divinity in everyone.

But my professor takes a critical stance against the Beats. The Beats, I learn, appropriated Black culture and exoticized Mexicans. They treated women badly in their personal lives and in their writing.

I come to realize that my core sense of self as a gay white male bohemian writer is ethically suspect. Seeking a moral refuge, I double down on my self-definition as a member of the working class. I resent that my professors are hypocrites — upper-middle-class whites whose political posturing advances their careers, denigrates my hopes and dreams, and utterly fails to stop the War on Terror.

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I walk by St. Joseph's Church a few blocks from the university. It's a façade of Doric columns and classical pediment. I feel alternatively attracted to and repulsed by the church's elegance. Inside, gay men meet in the basement for Alcohols Anonymous meetings. From the pulpit, a lisping priest issues harangues against sodomy.

Back in 1982 — four years before I'm born — the Gay Men's Health Crisis held its first meeting at this church.[7] In that year alone, over five hundred New Yorkers die of a virus that will soon engulf the gay community in grief and gangrene.

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Cinematic images from the 1970s feed my fantasies of becoming an urban cowboy writer in New York. I feel a hyper-real shock, therefore, when I begin carrying on an affair with a girl in my dorm — and she starts to gossip about her godmother, Meryl Streep.

"I know you're a fag," Lena scolds me and giggles. She's in her granny panties on the bunkbed in my dorm room. I'm typing a term paper about Nietzsche at my desk, trying to ignore her.

Streep, Lena divulges, lives down the hall from her parents' loft in SoHo. Lena's parents both exhibit their art at MoMA. I've never been to MoMA, and only know the museum from watching that one scene in *Manhattan*.

Manhattan shows Streep as a spiteful dyke. She divorces her husband and writes a nasty book about their marriage. The ex-husband, a whiney novelist, handles his existential crisis by sleeping with his best friend's mistress. He finally loses his one shot at true happiness, because he ends his fling with a high-schooler.

As an aspiring writer in New York, I assume that I should feel constitutionally unfulfilled and should pursue a hopelessly incompatible relationship with Lena, while listening to George Gershwin and dictating my complaints into a tape cassette recorder.

Lena stars in a short movie I write about a band of beatniks who live in an igloo in Washington Square.

Lena — born and raised in New York — psychoanalyzes herself. She says, laughing, that she only likes running around with me because her parents wouldn't approve.

7 O'Loughlin, "Surviving the AIDS Crisis as a Gay Catholic."

I don't even register the vast, class-based gulf that separates us, nor do I know that, soon, Lena's wealth and connections, and her art, will propel her to stardom.

I only know that Lena fits the part for now. She's the kind of high-strung and nagging, brilliant girlfriend, whom all of my literary and cinematic references teach me that I should date — but not actually love — if I want to become a New York intellectual. I guess I also fit the part, for her, of the lowlife, whom her parents warn her about.

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When I'm not bickering with Lena, I descend into the last remaining vestiges of the city's sexual and criminal underworld. In Washington Square Park, I buy dime bags from a guy who hides his stash in one of the park's trash cans. He calls me Woody, because my dirty blonde hair is already thinning.

The park's men's room is a redbrick shithouse. The corridor of toilets has no dividing walls (like in some kind of military barracks fantasy). At the long, stinky piss trough, men of all ages, races, and classes pee together, standing shoulder to shoulder. I sneak a peek but run out nervous.

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By accident, I discover the world of furtive, understall handjobs in the basement bathroom of the NYU library across the street from the park. The Bobst Library is yet another architectural monument to fascism.

The Bobst's designer is Philip Johnson, a card-carrying Nazi, who planned the library in 1973.[8] Twelve stories high, with an empty core, the Bobst seems to suck all meaning into its maw. The bookstacks encircle the black hole of the giant, vacant, central atrium. Every semester, at least one angsty undergraduate jumps into the library's nihilistic vortex.

8 See Saval, "Philip Johnson: The Man Who Made Architecture Amoral."

I gaze into that abyss, as my freshman year immerses me in Arendt's theories of evil, along with courses on postmodernism, chemistry, and urban planning — a courseload that leaves me unmoored and desperate for the solid, reactionary meaning that I left behind in Appalachia.

One source of stability is that, for days on end at the Bobst, I try not to look at the void in the middle of the library, but I sit in the darkened media center and watch ACT UP archival footage on a tiny TV set, or I sit and read at a carrel about the queer history of the neighborhood.

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I don't witness it personally, but the queer and the Catholic blur together in the history that's memorialized by St. Vincent's Hospital with its white brutalist box and sooty brick tower.

Back in 1989, a security guard at St. Vincent's roughed up a gay guy and threw him out of the ER because he kissed his boyfriend. Gay militants staged an occupation and held a kiss-in, covering crucifixes with condoms.

The city's cardinal took a hard line against abortion, safe sex, and homosexuality. But the nuns of St. Vincent's agreed to reeducate all of their employees. The AIDS Ward turned into a vivacious mix of cultures where patients put on drag shows, engaged in wild orgies, and the nuns pretended not to notice.[9]

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Late one night, when I'm weary from a day of reading, I leave the Bobst Library and walk through a darkened path of Washington Square, and I enter a lost world. A wild pack of older homos pick me up and spirit me away.

They grab a hold of me, flirting and skipping, and bring me to an unmarked door a few blocks away from the library on East Fourth Street.

9 Eubanks, *Ghosts of St. Vincent's,* 127.

The door is painted black. No signage. Squeezed between a pretentious sports bar and an obnoxious creperie. It leads down a hell red staircase.

The staircase is lined with posters for *Maltese Falcon* and *The Asphalt Jungle.* These images of hard-boiled masculinity — of the lonely white soul, lost in the vices of the city — accompany me, as, at the bottom of the stairs, I slip a ten dollar bill through the glass ticket window. I pass through a turnstile, and my eyes adjust to the movie theater darkness and to the classic, gay club smell of ammonia and amyl nitrites.

Squinting in the half-light, I see an empty bar with a mirror behind and glasses hanging from the ceiling. No one sits, drinking at the stools. No bartender stands, gossiping from behind the counter. Like an abandoned coal town, the bar feels haunted, all the inhabitants dead and gone.

Later, I'll read that this underground space is known as the Bijou. It was operated variously as a mafia-run drag bar, then as a dance club (for stars like Liz Taylor), and then as a rock venue (with performances by Lou Reed and David Bowie).[10] But for years, I only know this hidden basement as a movie theater that shows an eclectic mix of films (from Godard to *Toy Story*). The real show plays out on the other side of the big screen in a labyrinth of dim hallways and tiny booths.

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I'm nostalgic for the New York of mobsters, vigilantes, neurotic intellectuals. Travis Bickle and Alvy Singer and Tony Manero, however different, all seek self-realization, through sex or crime, and all of them find something close enough to redemption on the streets of New York.

But those psychopathologies belong to a different moment in the city's history. For the post-9/11 era, the movie *Shortbus* expresses how the toxic cocktail of AIDS and 9/11 creates a land-

10 See Maurer, "A Hidden Movie Theater and Underground Cruising Spot Has Left the East Village."

scape of heightened repression. Here, no one can hope for satisfaction, let alone salvation.

Shortbus shows New York as a giant sex club, where no one enjoys the orgies. In this version of New York, risk aversion makes intimacy impossible; people are so afraid of terrorism, viral contagion, and of one another, that the very idea of fulfillment feels like a dead end.

Shortbus opens with a graphic painting of the wrecked foundations of the World Trade Center. It's two empty holes, oily and gunky and bloody. The reddish orifices conflate sex with terror and suggest that the city itself is the terrifying body of a lover infected by disease.

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On my first very visit to the Bijou, I separate myself from the pack of older homos who led me down the hell red stairs. On the other side of the screening room, I meet a brawny stranger. He hands me a condom and pulls me into a dark booth. We kiss and fuck, and then I bound back up the hell red stairs without saying goodbye to my friends, and I run to my dorm room.

When I go to the pizzeria for a slice, I realize that the brawny stranger has nabbed my wallet. My bank insists that I file a police report in order to recover the charges on my debit card.

I lie to the NYPD, saying that I lost my wallet on the subway. The next morning, I fall ill with all of the telltale, early symptoms. Fiery fever. Chattering chills. Night sweats, soaking through my mattress.

The Lord, I assume, is punishing me. I overcome my dread of St. Vincent's Hospital and, after waiting for hours among the houseless and addled in the ER, I receive a diagnosis of mononucleosis. The nuns charge me $10 and tell me to rest.

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Lena also catches mono. Her parents blame me and ship her off to Oberlin. Soon she'll become a major TV star, and, in her

bestselling memoir, she'll write at length about how she suffers from chronic mono.

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I realize the error of my ways. Condoms protect me from STIs, but they don't ward off mono and robbery. So, as I begin to frequent the Bijou weekly, I conduct myself according to stricter protocols.

Deadpan and cold — like those posters of Bogart on the hell red stairs — I calculate every sex act, in order to maximize pleasure and minimize risk. Or, as my freshman urban planning professor explains in a lecture on risk theory, the point is "to get the most bang for your buck."

Put simply, I receive many blowjobs, but I never give a single one. I never kiss anybody. At the Bijou, I work hard to fuck efficiently. In this last remaining physical infrastructure of gay sex culture, I operate with a gentrifying mentality.

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Ironically, the city of *Shortbus* is a zone of constant hedonism, where everyone is chronically disconnected. The main characters are a pair of gay white men, trapped in a sexless relationship; a sex therapist who has never achieved orgasm; and a dominatrix who uses commodified sadomasochism to avoid self-exposure. These are the subjectivities of a gentrifying landscape.

The movie shows 9/11 and AIDS as the root causes of this malaise. In passing, one character makes fun of all the hip kids who, like me, moved to New York in the early 2000s. We've all come to the city, he says, because "9/11 was the most interesting thing that ever happened to them." I feel called out.

In *Shortbus,* the former mayor of New York, remarks on AIDS: "People said I didn't do enough to help prevent the AIDS crisis, because I was in the closet. That's not true. I did the best I could. I was … I was scared. And impermeable." It's this fear of

permeability that keeps me in the city, but not of it, preoccupied with seeing the city as a set of moral symbols.

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Just as I'm using bureaucratic mechanisms of risk assessment to regulate my sexual activity, corporate metrics of cost and benefit restructure the city's geography, and inform the national policy of war and peace.

Public health officials conceptualize sex as a calculation of risk, and zoning laws destroy most gay sex clubs. Safe sex campaigns train people to practice risk management through a bureaucratic model of sexual activity, informed by macroeconomic strategies of maximizing profit and driving down costs.[11]

The Bush Administration cites, as *casus belli,* the "risk" that Saddam Hussein might sell weapons of mass destruction to terrorists. By all accounts, Hussein never possesses such weapons.[12] But a paranoid sense of risk licenses the invasion of Iraq, and the wanton murder of hundreds of thousands of people.

Simultaneously, an inflated sense of "risk" gives the NYPD permission to militarize. The city's police force becomes, reportedly, one of the largest armies in the world. The cops — harassing innocent people of color, with the same racist paranoia that undergirds Bush's invasion of Iraq — accost almost a million innocent pedestrians per year.[13]

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I land a part-time job with the Parks Department, which is doing a survey of street trees. My job is to go to Staten Island every morning and find trees that are marked on my map, and then I take some notes about the trees. Surveying the trees is a sweet

11 See Paicheler, "Understanding Risk Management."

12 Morell, *The Great War of Our Time,* and CNN, "Cheney Cites 'Risks of Inaction' with Iraq."

13 On the racism of stop and frisk, see Wiggins, *Calculating Race: Racial Discrimination in Risk Assessment.*

gig, and I love taking the Ferry each morning across the Bay, especially because it makes me feel like I'm in the music video "Papa Don't Preach."[14]

The video starts with staccato violin and quick-cut shots of the harbor. Tugboats. The Ferry Terminal. Madonna is still in her *True Blue* period, with a leather jacket over the shoulder, singing of young love, unwanted pregnancy, fatherly disapproval, and Catholic devotion.

Madonna pleads, "Papa, I know you're going to be upset."

The ferry is the space where Madonna toggles between daughter and mother, between virgin and harlot and mother. It's here, when I'm floating on the bay — when I'm not quite in the city, but still able to see its gorgeous skyline — that I feel like New York might one day love me back.

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Promiscuous anonymous sex is the perfect activity for an introverted writer with a puritanical superego. I'm afraid of social contact but I seek transcendence, and I'm fucking like it's my job.

Each time that I screw some random stranger in the Bijou's dungeon, I wear a condom, not only to avoid HIV but also to avoid what I implicitly understand as the moralistic meaning of AIDS (as just punishment by an angry God).

The spirit of capital, Weber says, is the spirit of puritanical individualism, which sharply separates the saved from the damned. Furtively screwing, I'm encased not only in a latex prophylactic, but I'm also wrapped tightly in what Weber called the "iron cage" of the work ethic.

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14 Madonna, "Papa Don't Preach."

I'm too hung over to go to class. My professor demands that I hand-deliver my essay on *Le Père Goriot* to his doorman, so I work up the nerve to take the subway uptown.

In a train car, wedged between a banker and a janitor, I watch as a panhandler picks a fight with a raving preacher who says we are in the End of Days. The crowd eggs them on and it recalls one of those vignettes in the Gospels where dense throngs of the rich and poor alike all gather around Christ as he makes cryptic jokes. A metallic voice announces, "If you see something, say something."

The tagline insinuates that any and all of my fellow subway passengers are religious fanatics with packs of ticking suicide bombs strapped under their jackets.

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The ferry is also featured prominently in the 1988 film *Working Girl.* Like Madonna, Melanie Griffith commutes from working-class Staten Island to the center of global finance, and the ferry holds together Griffith's liquid identity, as she becomes a powerful player in the cutthroat world of business.

Unlike Madonna's "Papa Don't Preach," Carly Simon's "Let the River Run" has fallen into oblivion. The theme song for *Working Girl,* "Let the River Run" is tedious and moralistic. Simon is accompanied by an episcopal choir as she belts, "Let all the dreamers wake the nation / Come, the New Jerusalem."

The song — like the politics of *Working Girl* — is a Reaganite hymn to Manifest Destiny and white boardroom feminism.

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Sometimes I wet my whistle at the Boys' Room over on the East Side. It's a skanky watering hole, with cheap beer and cheap boys. On the bar, rail-thin, barely legal gogo dancers shimmy in the light of projected porno films. Suddenly, the bar closes down. Within a week the space turns into a sterile café where freelancers silently type on laptops.

A block away, demolition crews destroy the parish church, Mary Help of Christians.[15] The scene looks like London during the Blitz, a Gothic sanctuary reduced to rubble.

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Visiting the Upper West Side, I pass through Columbia University's well-manicured quad. The campus, designed in 1892, belongs to the City Beautiful movement — an attempt to use the beaux arts style to assimilate immigrants. On the street side, granite bases elevate the classroom buildings into towers. Like walls, they guard Columbia's ideal republic of straight lines, straight A's, straight teeth. This outer perimeter enshrines the university's temple-like libraries. A hierarchy of mind over body, trying to keep the polis out of the academy.

The original campus plan sets the university apart from the city. But Columbia — the city's largest private landowner — announces a major development initiative and begins to gobble up much of Harlem.[16]

Throughout the city, private universities — and freshmen like me — are driving uneven patterns of development. The city's private universities, situated on some of the most expensive real estate in the world, collectively own tens of billions of dollars of land. But they pay absolutely nothing in property taxes.

These universities exploit the city in their ad campaigns (for example, with slogans like "New York is my campus. Fordham is my school"). They leverage the city's reputation as a center of culture, in order to justify high tuitions, paid for by federal loans.

Every year, universities draw hundreds of thousands of wealthy kids into New York, where Student Services and Public Safety will buffer them from the grit and grime of Gotham.

15 See Dailey, "This 7-Story Building Is Replacing Mary Help of Christians"; Andito, "Memories of the Church of Mary Help of Christians"; and Grieve, "Counting Down to the End of Mary Help of Christians."

16 Eviatar, "The Manhattanville Project."

Every other semester it's time to role-play like 1968 and once again occupy Columbia's Butler Library to no effect whatsoever.

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Downtown, each Tuesday, the Cooper Union hosts art exhibits by undergrads. I show up each Tuesday because there is free beer in big aluminum tubs of ice, and because I'm a perennial outsider. I find it easier to hang out at Cooper than in the university where I'm actually enrolled.

I manage to get a Cooper ID and attend lectures by gay activist-artist, Gregg Bordowitz. For a couple of weeks I squat in a studio space in Cooper's Hewitt Building and paint.

The Hewitt Building lives up to my dreams of New York bohemia: a hulking, rundown, and neoclassical behemoth, overrun with adolescent art.

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Just a few blocks away from Cooper Square, I get my first taste of what I will come to call "gentrified medievalism."

Fundamentalists like Bush are repositioning the medieval theology of Augustine in order to promote imperialism and religious war aboard. And like an objective correlative, gentrification synthesizes medieval architectural styles with ruthless capitalism.

The gentrified medieval style finds no better expression than on 12th Street, at the former St. Ann's Catholic Church.

The church's façade reflects a zany history of urban overlap. In 1847, Presbyterians first built the church. It became a synagogue in 1854. Then in 1871, Catholics acquired the property. They demolished the original church but retained the façade, appending it to a French Gothic sanctuary.

The congregation prospered until the 1990s, when *The New York Times* chided St. Ann's for offering Mass in Latin as "a vac-

cine against the toxins of modern culture."[17] By 2005, St. Ann's shut its doors.

NYU acquires and tears down the church but again retains the façade, which now stands as a decorative folly that's appended to a twenty-six-story glass dormitory tower. In the tower there live thousands of wealthy kids, who colonize the Village with their suburban values.

The clashing scales and styles make no aesthetic sense. The generic glass dorm overshadows the Gothic, and the ruins of premodern religion are affixed to the dorm as a cynical veneer. The medievalist appendage tries to articulate NYU as a sophisticated and traditional university like Cambridge or Oxford — disguising how NYU is really just a real estate conglomerate.

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Cooper Union is named after Peter Cooper, the nineteenth-century tycoon. Cooper designed the first steam locomotive in the US and invented gelatin. Cooper used his Jello money to establish the Cooper Union in 1859, as a tuition-free school for science and art, located on the Bowery (at that time, a slum). Famously in 1860, Cooper knocked back a few pints of beer with Abraham Lincoln at a pub on 7th Street. Then Lincoln delivered a speech in Cooper Union's Great Hall — a pivotal moment that cemented Lincoln's candidacy for president. In the 1990s, the same hall hosted meetings of ACT UP. Now the neighborhood is transforming into a Starbucks colony. At the corner of Cooper Square and Astor Place, there are three separate Starbucks. They all face one another, from three corners of the intersection, serving up the same overpriced and over-roasted joe.

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17 Steinfels, "New York to Hear Mass in Latin: Language of Catholic Discontent."

My beloved Washington Square Park is turned into NYU's private quad.

NYU is unable to buy up the park directly. But the university makes undisclosed donations to the city government and becomes de facto owner of the park. While ostensibly public, the park is placed under the control of a secretive and privately run conservancy.

The conservancy's mission is "to keep Washington Square Park clean, safe, and beautiful." In other words, boring and bourgeois.

All of the sex and drugs are expunged from the park. Starting in 2007, NYU's contractors rip up almost every square inch of the park, and in marketing materials, NYU begins to call the park "the heart of the campus."[18]

NYU tears out the park's iconic fountain, only to rebuild it almost exactly in the same spot, but shifted a few feet, so that the fountain perfectly lines up with the Arch and Avenue. Such finicky adjustments display a gentrifying hostility toward the quirkiness of urban space, and a moralistic demand for cleanliness and order.

During renovations, NYU installs giant granite benches throughout the formerly open, central plaza. This is a deliberate attempt to depoliticize the park, to inhibit its use for protests. The university also destroys the old restroom — with that glorious, stinky piss trough. In its place is a spic-and-span lavatory, with mirrors strategically placed so that cops from outside can capture perverts who try to jerk off at the urinals.

The park is overrun by dressed-for-success MBA students, alongside moms and dads from Long Island, bringing Junior and Sissy into the Big City for a Campus Tour.

18 MEET NYU, "Virtual Campus Tour."

PART II

Homoeroticism, Architecture, Catholicism

My second date with Joey feels prophetic. Joey doesn't throw me into an otherworldly ecstasy. But we bond over our sickness unto death — our spiritual confusion as fellow homosexuals with conflicted religious beliefs who are entering into their first gay relationship.

Joey invites me over to his tiny studio apartment on East 14th Street, across the street from a public housing project that is in the process of being sold to private interests.

We barely fit into his studio apartment, which contains an IKEA bed, an IKEA desk, an oven, a sink, and stacks of books. Joey explains his doctoral research about algebraic topology by observing what he calls the homotopy equivalence between a coffee mug and a chocolate donut.

Joey — with his effete frame, olive skin, heavy glasses — reminds me uncannily of someone I can't remember.

I've never heard of *Angels in America*. I'm just glad to cuddle with Joey in his IKEA bed as we watch *Angels* on his MacBook.

* * *

Cooper Union's Board of Trustees are hatching a scheme that will bring Cooper to financial ruin. The Board announces plans to demolish the Hewitt Building in order to construct a new campus center — a fatal miscalculation.

I sign a petition and join Cooper students in a protest up and down the Bowery.

In a frenzy, students cover the Hewitt Building with graffiti. The Hewitt is enveloped in a teen boy wet dream, as art bros spray-paint and sharpie every surface with cartoons of snot ghosts, speaking to one another in semen speech bubbles. Smiley-face poop piles mock the Board, and the Hewitt's giant, marble columns are restyled as unloading dongs. But the Board, undeterred, throws a wrecking ball against the Hewitt.[1]

A financial boondoggle, the new construction causes the school to implode. As it turns out, the Board funded the project by acquiring massive debt, which plunges Cooper into the red. For over a century and a half, Cooper ran as a free charity with no tuition imposed on students, but now the Board begins to charge tuition.[2]

On the street, the new building seems to float out of context like someone downloaded onto the streetscape a 3D rendering. It looks like a giant crumple of aluminum foil, the disposable wrapper of a fast-food burger, a metaphor for how higher education is part of the process that sucks dry the city's soul.

* * *

Tony Kushner's Pulitzer-winning AIDS play, *Angels in America,* is set in New York City in 1985. It thrusts me and Joey into the early years of the HIV pandemic, just a few months before Joey and I are born.

In *Angels,* religion is the key to the play's characterization of all of the leading figures. Religious debate is essential to the

1 Florida, "The Paradox of Prosperity at America's Universities," and Kensinger, "As Columbia University Moves into Manhattanville."

2 Kaminer, "College Ends Free Tuition."

play's underlying political message — that gay people are part of America's divine destiny — and the play's religiosity is braided into the setting of New York City.

One character, Louis, is a secular Jew and he's prone to a stereotypical, neurotic preoccupation with ethical inquiry. Louis's boyfriend, Prior, is a WASP. Early on, Prior reveals to Louis that he is sick with AIDS, and Louis brutally abandons him. Louis spends the rest of the play wracked with guilt. AIDS symptoms cause Prior to hallucinate and he sees angels, along with the ghosts of his puritan ancestors. These spiritual guides suggest that Prior is a prophet.

One of the play's subplots features the notorious New York powerbroker, Roy Cohen — another gay Jew who is tormented by guilt, due to his involvement in the execution of Ethel Rosenberg.

Politically, these religious themes evoke the core tenets of American civic religion (a spirit of tolerance, and a sense of the country's destiny as sacred). Kushner aims to position gay folks as a kind of Chosen People, whose inclusion in liberal-pluralist society is self-evidently part of the country's overall, messianic mission. In other words, the play tries to sacralize the homosexual as yet another pilgrim in one nation, under God.

In this effort to ennoble gay people, New York serves not only as background but as an allegorical landscape filled with symbols. Religious landmarks like St. Vincent's Hospital, along with a statue of an angel in Central Park, corroborate a sense of the city as a political-theological geography in which the various pilgrim characters seek personal and national salvation.

The play is very, very long — almost eight hours — and Joey clicks pause on the MacBook and wants to know what I think.

At this moment in my life, I can't articulate why I find *Angels* offensive. I can't even consciously acknowledge that I don't like the play. As a gay person, I subsist on crumbs, and I feel like any play with gay themes is more than good enough.

I'll take issue later with how Kushner propagates a gentrified version of AIDS history: He tells a version of gay history that

appeals to the upper-middle-class straight Long Islanders who come into the city to watch Broadway shows.

Later, I'll learn that gay people, as a rule, don't abandon one another (as Louis abandons Prior in the play). In fact, the straight world and the US government abandon gay people. Gay people resist by forming networks of kinship and care and activism.

For now, I can't put my finger on why it's so troubling how, in *Angels,* nobody dies of AIDS, except for the villainous Roy Cohn. Later, I'll realize that this plot point insidiously underscores the slander that AIDS is a deserved punishment for evil.

In hindsight, I understand that *Angels* is an extremely triggering date for two young homos, both from fundamentalist backgrounds, who are only just barely out of the closet.

But for now, all I can do is hug Joey as we cry in each other's arms.

Joey confesses that, for his whole life, he always wanted to become a great rabbi. But Joey's Orthodox community has rejected him for his homosexuality. His mother is disappointed that he studies mathematics. She continues telling him that he ought to become a Supreme Court Justice, or, at the very least, a US Senator.

I tell Joey about how much I loved reading the Bible as a kid, how the Bible inspired me to want to become a writer.

As I, a WASP, lay in the arms of Joey, a Jew — and as *Angels* fictionalizes the harrowing early years of AIDS, activating some of our deepest traumas — what feels religious, to me at this moment, is how Joey and I both want to be with one another, not *despite* being gay, but *because* of being gay. How, what brings us together is the very thing that makes us pariahs. Or, in Biblical terms, "the last has become the first," and "the stone that the builders once rejected has become the cornerstone."

I spend the night, and we make love, and within a month I am moving into Joey's tiny studio apartment on East 14th Street. The tiny studio apartment quickly feels even tinier.

* * *

I still want to be a writer, but I'm working part-time as a cheesemonger at a pretentious cheese shop, and I'm working part-time as a paid intern on an urban planning campaign. Meanwhile, the contradictions of the gentrifying city drive me to try to convert to Catholicism but cause me to fail in the attempt.

* * *

It's the era of Hope & Change. I have a day job in public policy and wonder if I won't some day run for political office. But while I understand policy analysis, I'm still shy and reserved and unable to make friends at the labor union where I work.

The union headquarters is way out in Queens, one block from Long Island. All of the union reps are tough-talking Outer Borough types who constantly throw around words like faggot and cocksucker.

The union hires me to help out on a lobbying campaign. The union represents supermarket workers. But like all unions, it's in decline. For decades, real estate patterns in the city have favored small gourmet marts and have disadvantaged supermarkets. Since the era of white flight in the 1950s, large supermarket chains have preferred to operate in the suburbs. The situation has left many neighborhoods in the city without access to fresh, healthy fruits and vegetables (the so-called "food desert" crisis).

* * *

Joey likes to repeat his little joke that the Lower East Side is a neighborhood for "middle-class people who pay upper-class prices to live in lower-class apartments."

The joke starts to feel annoying. But it encapsulates some of the ironies about the historical development of the neighborhood.

* * *

The union is cynically joining the food justice movement, as a way to open new supermarkets in the city and to increase its membership. We're trying to push a bill through the City Council that will subsidize the development of supermarkets in low-income neighborhoods.

Every week, my boss and I meet with City Council staffers, and with officials at the Department of City Planning. My boss is a Jimmy Hoffa wannabe. The City Planning bureaucrats all went to Yale. At the meetings my boss screams expletives at them: "You tell the mayor he can shove this bill up his ass." The Yalies wilt.

Like everyone at the union, I want Obama to win. On weekends, I take the Susquehanna Trailways bus back to Appalachia but don't let my folks know I'm around as I knock on screen doors and talk to gun-toting, toothless rednecks, asking them to vote.

* * *

During the nineteenth century, millions of Italian and Irish Catholics, and Eastern European Jews, cram into the redbrick tenements of the Lower East Side.

Due to ethnic and religious differences, the dominant WASP culture doesn't consider these folks white. But the unwashed masses segregate themselves from Blacks in order to assimilate into whiteness. The Catholic Church and the emergent labor movement violently discriminate. On the Lower East Side, priests sometimes refuse to give Communion to African Americans. The trade unions create conditions for new immigrants to enter the middle class. And soon, federal policies enable whites to leave the city to buy houses in the suburbs. The Lower East Side becomes even more impoverished as people like Joey's grandmother leave for Long Island. Just two generations later, Joey, without realizing it, moves back to help gentrify it.

Almost every Saturday, Joey's mother guilt-trips him to schlep out to Long Island for Shabbos, and Joey begs me to come along.

* * *

I don't know anything about cheese, but Joey knows the guy who manages the fromagerie in the Essex Street Market.

For Joey, ethical consumption is a way of coping with the soul-crushing guilt of no longer keeping kosher. *The Art of Simple Food* is like Joey's Bible. He insists that we eat only local and organic food, and that we buy all of our produce at the hyper-expensive Union Square Farmers' Market.

Instead of using sexual lubricant, Joey demands that — for health and for environmental reasons — we fuck using 100% virgin olive oil. So, every time that I eat pasta, I'm reminded, like a Pavlovian reflex, of ass.

We store the olive oil in the underwear drawer with the kippot.

* * *

Wall Street has caused a global financial crisis by trading bad housing loans. Candidate Obama comes to the rescue and consents to a bailout package that redistributes a trillion dollars of public cash to the goons responsible for the disaster, and provides no remedy to the thousands of people whose homes will be foreclosed.

Angry, I attend a meeting at a community center on 15th Street. We're going to organize a protest march.

At the meeting, I sit for six hours and listen politely as the Maoists are arguing with the Trotskyites. One faction proposes that we should wear duct tape on our mouths to show that we have been silenced. Someone begins ranting about how "9/11 was an inside job." Finally, a vote is taken and it's decided that we will not put duct tape on our mouths. The pro–duct tape faction demands a recount and I leave with a migraine.

* * *

I hold public office. Through connections at the union, I'm appointed to my local Community Board. The experience exacerbates how fractures within the Left leave me feeling adrift, without a clear ethical orientation.

I'm on a Zoning Committee, and I attend my first meeting in the auditorium of a high school on the Lower East Side. The chair gives me a firm handshake. Mr. Chair is tall and white and handsome, with straight teeth, in Levi's and a white-collared shirt. Mr. Chair is the kind of homo-nationalist gay who serves in the Marines, goes to Yale, and runs for president. I wonder if I want to be like him.

Mr. Chair calls the meeting to order, and I notice another figure in my periphery. This figure, all of two feet tall, saddles up to me, and stage-whispers in my ear urgently — and I quote verbatim: "I'm Harry Wieder — a gay, Jewish, left-wing, middle-aged, HIV-positive dwarf, I ambulate on crutches, and both of my parents survived the Holocaust."[3]

Mr. Chair shushes us.

"Last week," Harry tells me, "I met a guy on Craigslist, who said that he wanted to fist me, and use me like a puppet."

Mr. Chair tells Harry to please be quiet.

Both Harry and Mr. Chair fill me with titillation, and embarrassment. They seem to represent, alternatively, the two poles of my New York experience — old and new modes of being gay, the Village before and after gentrification.

A few weeks later, Harry is hit by a taxi and killed while crossing Essex. A block of Forsyth Street is named Harry Wieder Way in his honor. I learn from elegies in the newspapers report that Harry was, in fact, one of the most important activists of his generation.

* * *

3 Yakas, "Community Activist Harry Wieder Killed by Taxi," and amNY, "'Harry Wieder Way' Honors Activist's Supersized Impact."

On Inauguration Day, I sit in the conference room at the union headquarters with the whole gang of reps and organizers. On the big screen TV, we watch as our new president swears in on the Bible. We've all spent months working hard to support him, and everyone is gleeful.

Obama will never deliver on his big campaign promise to institute the "card check" policy, which would drastically reform the process for joining unions. Instead, for some unknown reason, Obama invites Reverend Rick Warren to give the inaugural prayers. Warren — a far-right and anti-gay Evangelical — has just orchestrated a ballot initiative in California that abolishes marriage equality.

My colleagues at the union all hug and high-five each other, and there's cake and ice cream. I step out of the conference room, head down the hallway, pop into the restroom, and break down crying.

Soon, the mayor signs into law the supermarket subsidy bill that I've worked to help get passed. Immediately after, I'm laid off from the union. My boss tells me it's because I didn't try hard enough to fit into the boys' club. Soon, urban planners will point out that the subsidy program hasn't resolved the food desert issue, but has only succeeded in exacerbating gentrification.[4]

* * *

A live-in maid greets me and Joey at the front door of his mother's house on Long Island, and as we stand in the foyer under the chandelier, she presents me with a freshly ironed shirt and a blazer from Saks, along with a yarmulke. It's the first time I've been in a mansion, and the first time that I've worn a suit.

I'm ushered up the spiral stairs to change into my disguise. Joey's mother proudly says that I "look just like a little rebbe." Joey is immediately pissed off at me; his mother likes me more than him. She adjusts my kippah and pulls my beard and asks

4 Cohen, "REFRESH: Modifying the Food Retail Expansion."

me to make her a cup of tea and flirtatiously calls me her Shabbos goy.

The maid rushes back and forth from the kitchen to the dining room carrying silver platters. The giant cherrywood table hosts dozens of family members and neighbors. They must not know about Joey's sexuality, or the gossip could ruin his sister's chances for a good marriage, since homosexuality is considered a genetic disorder. From one end of the table, a heavily made-up yenta brusquely yells, why don't I speak Hebrew? Joey fields the inquiry and tells her that my parents aren't very religious.

"It's a shonda," she says, rolling her eyes and seeing through the charade.

I'm glad to play along, pretending to be Joey's straight Jewish friend. At Shabbos dinners and on holy days, I relish the chance to gorge myself on kugel and brisket, challah and baba ganoush.

Because of my childhood experiences as a scapegoat, I have a knack for keeping quiet and acting like an embedded ethnographer — for seeing myself as a pilgrim disconnected from the world.

My observations don't amount to much more than idle exoticization. As a working-class Protestant, I've never before come into intimate contact with wealth or ritual. I'm dazzled by the goblets and the candles, the strident disputations, and the rituals of pouring out wine droplets like blood.

I'm drawn to these festivities, and want to be part of them. Joey's family doesn't accept him, but I wish I had a family, and I covet ceremony. But of course, I can never really become Jewish. Yet my own upbringing is caught up in Judaism — reading the Old Testament — and as I pretend to be a Jew, I wonder who I am.

* * *

One day, I come home from the grocery store with a bag of conventionally grown carrots. Joey bursts into tears. He says that I don't really love him, because I don't respect his ethical deci-

sions. He paces frantically in the apartment, as he regrets how, once again, he's splurged on imported Stilton and Gruyère.

I also feel conflicted. Joey is brilliant and handsome and charming, but high-strung and controlling — another version of the nagging girlfriend in my movie about being a failed New York novelist, constitutionally unfulfilled.

On one side, the sustainable food movement makes me feel righteous, gives my life structure. It's a practically puritanical code of ethics, and a substitute for traditional religion.

But on the other side are the class politics. After all, Joey's mother sends him a check every month to help him with the rent; and I'm the one who's working as a cheesemonger.

* * *

An organic onion falls off of the counter as I'm cooking and rolls under the bed. Joey is in Calvins with an icepack on his head, sweating in the sweltering New York summer. I search for the onion.

Divorce rates are skyrocketing, and marriage rates have tanked. But for some reason, homos like me and Joey want access to matrimony. Obama and the Clintons are opposed to marriage equality and cite their belief in the Christian God.

Meanwhile Joey and I — like a lot of gay guys of our generation — are using monogamy as a risk management strategy. We're playing house and feel conflicted about the idea of an open relationship. The real reason why we're monogamous is because we want to have bareback sex but are afraid of HIV.

Sometimes one of us agrees to an open relationship, but then the other one changes his mind. Whenever we try to have a trio, it turns into bureaucratic paperwork — collecting people's test results. The Obamas and the Clintons will suddenly change their minds and pretend like they always supported us. PrEP won't be invented for several more years.

* * *

Joey's habit of buying expensive cheese helps me land my part-time gig at the cheese shop, and now several days a week I'm standing behind the counter on my tippy toes, trying to peer over a wall of parm wheels, while wealthy yoga moms bombard me with queries about the provenance of some gourmet gouda.

The Essex Street Market is undergoing gentrification. It was founded during the Depression, and the Market still includes a few stalls that sell bagels and lox at reasonable prices, along with a shop with votive candles and herbs for brujería. But the neighborhood's working-class Jews and Puerto Ricans are being pushed out. The city government is in the process of closing down the Market altogether in order to redevelop the location into a luxury high-rise.

* * *

My theme song this year, 2010, is Rihanna's "What's My Name?" The music video takes place on the Lower East Side and shows the Essex Street Market where I work. The song's lyrics — hot and sexy — are explicitly about the neighborhood. Rihanna sings with a hint of sadomasochism: "Hey boy, I really wanna see if you / Can go downtown with a girl like me."

Rihanna vamps through the streets. Construction scaffolding is seen constantly in the background — a harbinger of destruction and redevelopment. The song is an advertising jingle for the project of redeveloping "downtown."

Rihanna sings, "Baby you're a challenge / Let's explore your talent." Seduction is entrepreneurship. Sex is human resources management. Rihanna is "looking for a guy, to put to *work*." As she sings, she seeks a lover who "knows how to *work* [her] body."

* * *

Grindr is launched in 2011. It cashes in on the primitive accumulation accomplished by gentrification. Since the city has lost all of its cruising infrastructure, the new app further facilitates the bureaucratic abstraction of sex.

Sex, removed from the parks and piers, is expunged from shared public space and negotiated in virtual chats. Sex is evacuated from the body and floats in the realm of representation.

The Grindr grid sorts everyone by statistics of race, weight, and height, and turns the phallus into a dick pic. Cruising is no longer grounded in shared spaces of sexual infrastructure, but is always already downloaded onto my screen.

Like AirBnB, Grindr turns everyone's apartment into the temporary waystation of a multinational corporation.

* * *

One day at the cheese shop, I'm cutting a wedge of Tomme de Chèvre au Muscadet, and I accidentally slice the knife into the cable of the ham slicer. Sparks fly. The lights go out. The manager sends me home.

I'm able to collect unemployment, but my brief careers in cheese and politics have filled me with despair. I refuse to get out of bed.

* * *

Joey warns me that he's going to Beijing for one week for an algebraic typography conference. Meantime, he says, I better figure out what I want to do with my life, or he's going to kick me out.

* * *

The conflation of work and eros is, arguably, the agenda of Rihanna's entire oeuvre, which elsewhere, hypnotically transforms sexual tension into "work, work, work, work, work, work."[5] In her song, "Work," the language of the human resources office

5 Throughout I refer to the video and lyrics from Rihanna, "Rihanna – Work (Explicit) Ft. Drake," *YouTube,* February 22, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HL1UzIK-flA.

colonizes sexual pursuit. Drake, who is featured on the song, raps, "when I see potential I just gotta see it through" — articulating romance as investing in human capital.

* * *

While Joey is in China, I spend six days getting shitfaced on the fire escape overlooking 14th Street, leaving the apartment only to get more beer at the bodega. I drink Budweiser and I smoke Marlboros, and I remember the old porch swing back home — how I used to dream that I'd grow up and move to the city and become Jack Kerouac, how I was afraid that I'd end up drinking myself to death.

When the beer runs out, I stumble downstairs. Every other car that drives down First Avenue is playing *Thriller*. Michael Jackson is dead. I overhear someone say, "This is just like 9/11."

I feel that salty taste rising in my mouth, and I hold my head between my knees. Over there is the bodega, but I stumble along 12th to Strand Books. I blindly march through the stacks, to the back of the store, where I climb up and teeter on the top of an aluminum step ladder and pull volumes of poetry from the stacks. My unemployment checks are going to fund me, I decide, while I try to figure out how to become a gay writer. What suggests medieval Catholicism to me as a spiritual framework is the writings of someone who used to live in the neighborhood, W.H. Auden.

* * *

Rihanna laments the urban environment in "We Found Love in a Hopeless Place." But she never mentions what political-economic forces have made cities so seemingly hopeless, what drives people to shack up in codependent relationships as the only strategy for paying the rent.

* * *

The book *Attached* becomes a bestseller. It popularizes the pseudo-science of attachment theory. The book encourages me to become "proficient" in the "science" of using a "unified protocol" of "diagnostic tools" to "assess" what are called "attachment styles."[6]

By using what the authors call scientific "instruments," people are systematically categorized, as "secure," "anxious," or "avoidant."

After diagnosing others according to this rubric, "behavior is no longer […] baffling and complex but rather predictable." These tools demonstrate how "behaviors that we used to attribute to people's personality traits" are actually the product of how everyone is "programmed to act in a predetermined manner."

In other words, attachment theory banishes everything that makes knowing another person worthwhile, and turns everyone into an algorithmic code. *Attached* explicitly confesses its "lack of examples of LGBT relationships" and suggests that "because the language of attachment is universal, one can easily change the gender of the person in the examples."

Grindr and *Attached* are both gentrifying: They are mechanisms for insulating sex and love from personality and from meaningful political-economic contexts. Human connection, and even sex, is abstracted into the individual consumer's disembodied quest to satisfy impersonal, generic needs.

* * *

Auden fled Weimar Berlin at the start of the Nazi regime and settled in the Village. He supported his poetry by working as a part-time professor of premodern literature. Auden lived with his long-term, Jewish boyfriend Chester Kallman — just a few blocks from me and Joey on St. Mark's Place. Back then, every place on the block was a gay bathhouse. Now, it's a boardwalk of tattoo parlors, cotton candy, and stores that sell I❤️NY t-shirts.

6 Levine and Heller, *Attached: Are You Anxious, Avoidant or Secure?*, 11, 12, 29, and 31.

* * *

I feel ambivalent about the pending demolition of St. Vincent's Hospital. Of course, I sign a petition, and I go to an obligatory protest. But it seems futile — there's no stopping the gentrifiers who are planning to destroy the hospital — and the hospital always scared me, anyway.

The hospital is also badly managed. The Sisters of Charity have dedicated themselves to caring for the sick and poor, but they've run a huge deficit. Annually they give away $30 million of free medical care to the downtrodden. Their economic irrationality has brought about the hospital's downfall, and they've filed for bankruptcy.[7]

* * *

What appeals to me about Auden is the way that — so close to me geographically — his writings struggle to process the two big problems of my own life: the codependent homoeroticism of the Jewish/Gentile dialectic, and the failures of the Left.

In the post-9/11 era, Auden has come back into fashion. He is fondly remembered for his poem "September 1, 1939," which — I think, because of NPR? — becomes associated with the World Trade Center and the War on Terror.

There are several, rather superficial reasons why this association makes sense: Auden's poem takes place at a dive bar in New York, in September, on the eve of a world war, and Auden's poem seems to counsel a way toward peace by positing that "we must love one another or die."

* * *

I'm not alone in seeing St. Vincent's Hospital as an ambiguous marker of gay misery and Christian charity. In *The New Yorker,* Andrew Boynton writes an elegy for the hospital, confessing

7 Sulmasy, "Then There Was One: The Unraveling of Catholic Health Care."

how the very sight of St. Vincent's provokes feelings of aversion: "All these years, averting my eyes as I passed St. Vincent's, I was in a way judging the hospital to be an accessory in my friends' deaths."

Boynton, meditating on the AIDS ward, calls St. Vincent's "an unlovely collection of buildings."[8] And with the same classist disdain often used to chide socialist architecture, he mocks the Hospital's brutalist style.[9]

For 161 years, St. Vincent's has forced pedestrians to see, face to face on the street, the truth of our condition as created beings, and the intractable evils of poverty and sickness. But gentrification pushes these evils offstage, repressing them, and replacing them with progress, profit, and private interest.[10]

Obscenely, the nuns of St. Vincent's take vows of chastity and care for people who are otherwise hated by society. But costs go up for specialized medical procedures, funds go down from public agencies, and St. Vincent's vanishes. Public charity cannot compete in a city ruled by personal interest. All of the market signals clearly indicate that neighborly love is not in anyone's self-interest. If a bunch of nuns want to practice loving kindness in private, then that is their right. But why should anyone have to subsidize them?

* * *

Auden's poem also coined the phrase "the normal heart" to describe same-sex love. The phrase serves as the title for Larry Kramer's Tony-winning AIDS play, *The Normal Heart*. When the poem becomes popular again in the post-9/11 era, people seem not to notice Auden's theology.

Auden ultimately disowned the poem. In 1964, Lyndon Johnson's notorious "Daisy Ad" recited the line, "we must love one another or die" in an ominous voice-over. The advertisement

8 Boynton, "Remembering St. Vincent's."
9 See Grindrod, *How to Love Brutalism.*
10 See Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics.*

showed a pretty, young blonde toddler, picking a daisy, and being zapped to smithereens by an atomic blast. Auden subsequently announced that he was retracting the poem. As he said, "we must love one another *and* die."[11] He refused to include the poem in his collected works.

* * *

In 2011, Rudin Management buys up the St. Vincent's campus for $260 million. Rudin Management already owns over $2 billion in New York real estate. Rudin sets out to tear down the hospital and quickly redevelops the property into a swanky series of luxury buildings.

Formerly, the Emergency Room turned the street corner into a memento mori. The very existence of the Hospital compelled me to meditate on my mortality. But the new apartment complex, squeaky-clean and generic, has no personality, no presence. The brutalist, antinomian terrain becomes a set of faceless apartments, now known as Greenwich Lane.

The destruction of St. Vincent's reconfigures how pedestrians interact with suffering. Gentrification removes moral and bodily concerns from civic space — redefining the good as private property.

Advertisements promote Greenwich Lane as "nestled together in the West Village, New York's most intimate and desirable neighborhood."[12] The complex even features a private, "lush central garden" that is "in the spirit of classic village greens" — except, of course, that the spirit of the village green was public.[13]

* * *

11 Skelton, *Poetry of the Thirties,* 280.
12 Corcoran, "The Greenwich Lane."
13 StreetEasy, "Complex: The Greenwich Lane."

I feel drawn to Auden's shrewd insistence that we must love and that we must die. No amount of ethical strictness or political progress will ever undo the brutal facts of our mortal condition.

In *The Prolific and the Devourer,* Auden writes about his conversion from Marxism to Catholicism. Auden argues that, as a writer, he needs a moral framework that tolerates complexity, that views humans as both depraved and beautiful, and that recognizes the moral importance of individual desire. "My wants," Auden writes, "are just as much a part of reality as anything else."[14]

For Auden, having a "normal heart" isn't a compliment. Auden proposes that homosexuals are "normal" in the sense that we, like everyone else, are prone to selfishness and cruelty, and to difficult relationships. Still, he insists that these subjective wants and strivings are constitutive of objective reality.

Joey says he feels offended by my interest in Catholicism, as a Jew and especially as an atheist. He can't understand why I've started going to Mass.

I try to explain, I just want to have some kind of tradition, the way that Joey and his family do.

Joey lets me hang up my Crucifix, and he makes me promise that, whenever his mother visits, I'll hide the Crucifix in the underwear drawer with the olive oil and the kippot.

* * *

In *Ghosts of St. Vincent's,* Tom Eubanks, a former patient in the AIDS ward, writes that the gentrifiers destroyed the Hospital and "forgot to exorcise the souls of all those who suffered and died."

But gentrifiers aren't superstitious, and even the Catholic Archdiocese has declined, lately, to fill the official position of New York City Exorcist.[15]

* * *

14 Auden, *The Prolific and the Devourer,* 3.

15 Massarella, "The World Desperately Needs More Exorcists."

Throughout New York, the ultra-rich buy and sell apartments — not as homes, but as investments. This empties housing of its basic material function and leaves it as a shell of itself — a placeholder for the virtual flows of finance. The realities of city life become secondary.

The gentrified scenery seeks to escape from bodily concerns — by destroying hospitals, by erecting generic buildings, by turning homes into abstract "housing." Now "the city" no longer exists, and "the Village" stands in as an advertisement of itself. There are no temples, now, to blood or to semen — neither devotion to salvific wounds, nor to sodomitical seediness. No guts — pouring out from statues of the scourged savior — and no gloryholes.

Along 11th Street, in place of the old hospital, the new townhouses look like they belong in architectural scare quotes, imitations of "townhouses" — as if a townhouse swallowed a computer-generated, mirror version of itself. This architectural style abstracts the landscape into quantitative profit.

Once I perceived the city as a parable for my soul. Now the gentrified city represents calculation and commercialization.[16] The complex is all surface, and no depth. All glass, no shadows. It seems to have been downloaded onto the street from some 3D-rendering software.[17] The architectural style of Greenwich Lane reflects a renunciation of the material world. Transcendence, of a kind.

* * *

I take Auden's advice that a young poet should study medieval languages and linguistic history.

In December, I read aloud to Joey a line that Auden wrote for Kallman on Christmas: "Because it is in you, a Jew, that I, a

16 Plitt, "$40M Greenwich Lane Penthouse Is the Village's Most Expensive Condo."

17 See Maldonado-Estrada, *Lifeblood of the Parish: Men and Catholic Devotion in Williamsburg, Brooklyn,* 192.

Gentile, inheriting an Oh-so-genteel antisemitism, have found my happiness / As this morning I think of Bethlehem, I think of you."[18]

For me, as for Auden, a fraught Jewish/Gentile gay romance in New York City is the precondition for grappling with the Incarnation.

* * *

Across the street from Greenwich Lane, Rudin is planning to build an AIDS Memorial. It's a web of steel that turns public space into an iron cage. The memorial is not, in fact, memorable. It is a muted net of empty, off-white triangles — like the furniture Joey's mom buys for him from IKEA.

As a tangle of pallid metal, without any particularity, the Memorial could easily represent any cause, and could easily be inserted top-down onto the streets of any major city (next to the H&M and Starbucks).

Dishonest reports suggest that the Memorial has emerged "after successful community advocacy" through "a grassroots coalition."[19] In fact, local residents oppose the demolition of St. Vincent's and demand a new hospital building. In response, public officials champion a Memorial as a way to save face while siding with business against community.[20]

Two professional gentrifiers spearhead the Memorial project. One is a "real estate creative director" and the other is "a development professional" with a degree in economics from Chicago. Combining Chicago School ideology with personal privilege,

18 See Roberts, "W.H. Auden and the Jews."

19 New York City AIDS Memorial, "How Much of the Park Is Dedicated to the AIDS Memorial?"

20 Soultanian-Braunstein, "Council Approves Conversion of Saint Vincent's Triangle into City Parkland with AIDS Memorial," and Brewer, "Recommendation on ULURP Application Nos. C. 150203 MMM and N 150237 ZRM – 76."

the two cofounders confess that they are "ignorant" about HIV.[21] I would like to be ignorant of HIV, as well.

Rudin controls the design process and cuts out community input. Plans for a monument begin to move through the city's bureaucracy, and initial designs propose to use the entire park to commemorate AIDS, with an ACT UP museum.[22] This design envisions "slabs of granite for visitors to write the names, in chalk, of loved ones who had passed away" as well as "plants growing up the steel canopy."[23] But Rudin scraps all of these ideas, citing "our best interest."[24]

The Memorial serves Rudin's public relations efforts. The memorial's designers, Studio ai, describe the Memorial as a "commercial" project.[25] The ai team acknowledges Rudin as its commercial patron. The Memorial represents the commercialization of AIDS history and commemorates the commodified privatization of life and death.

Official discourse about the Memorial — from its designers and patrons — highlights how this gentrifying architecture empties urban space of moral purpose.

Strangely, the memorial's official website explains that the Memorial design uses grey triangles, because these triangles "draw on the triangular nature of the lot."[26] The Memorial recalls the pink triangle of Nazi death camps, and of ACT UP's logo, but literally whitewashes this emblem of gay suffering and activism, in favor of a more corporate grey.

As Studio ai explains, they develop the Memorial while turning "towards more abstract concepts like the feeling of being under a tree canopy, the sound of water, etc." Of course, feeling and sound are *not* abstract concepts, but physical sensations.

The Memorial, however, represents an effort to expunge physicality from urban space. With the same spirit that de-

21 Tepper, "What's Next for the NYC AIDS Memorial?"
22 CityLand, "Rudin's St. Vincent's Project Completes Public Review."
23 Arthur, "AIDS Memorialization: A Biomedical Performance."
24 Vaatainen, "St. Vincent's AIDS Memorial in Limbo."
25 Studio ai Architects, "NYC AIDS Memorial."
26 Ibid.

stroyed a hospital, a Memorial about AIDS is erected that says nothing about AIDS. In fact, Studio ai "wanted a space that can be all things to all people." The designers explained that "the nature of the AIDS crisis is not what our history has memorialized before — typically wars, revolutions, a person, an event."

During my lunch break I sit on the Memorial with a take-out container of kale salad and check my email on my phone.

* * *

I tell Joey that I'm not going to watch Occupy Wall Street in the cinema, but I'll wait until it comes out on DVD. The revolution, I suspect, will be televised, and it won't be very revolutionary.

But Occupy is the only thing that's on.

So, I sit for a few hours on the ground in Washington Square Park as people talk endlessly and make jazz hands. And when the cops murder another Black kid, I join a march that meanders around Harlem. We don't have a permit, and for a few hours, we interrupt traffic. It feels edgy but ultimately unproductive.

* * *

I don't realize that graduate school is preparation for an academic career. All I know is that Joey, a doctoral student in math, spends most of his days leisurely reading at a café, and once a week teaches algebra in Queens. I imagine that if I can win a scholarship to study medieval literature, it will help me develop my skills as a writer, so I send out applications.

* * *

In the same year that Rudin destroys the hospital and begins planning its cynical AIDS memorial, the city finally opens up the National 9/11 Memorial. Practically every resident of the city hates the memorial. Especially galling is that it is not only ugly, but it took ten years to build.

During the long and storied process of designing the Memorial, the project's first creative director, Michael Shulan, resigns in protest. He rejects how the Memorial feels "like a New York City tourist attraction" and not like "a museum offering a nuanced portrayal of history."[27]

The 9/11 Memorial is privately owned and operated — a commercialization of public grief.

The Memorial is made of two monstrous black holes, dug into the old buildings' foundations. According to *The New Yorker,* the memorial primarily caters to out-of-towners, because locals have "balked at the museum's commercial aspects." Life-denying, the two black holes of the Memorial constantly suck an infinite stream of water into their empty vortices.

In *The Washington Post,* architecture critic Philip Kennicott describes the Memorial as "a hellish descent into a dark place." In the *Times,* Holland Cotter writes that the Memorial is overbearingly moralistic.[28]

The old Twin Towers were ghastly enough. Now the memorial approximates the empty heart of a society that, with fundamentalist zeal, imposes its empty, consumerist vision on the rest of the world.

* * *

I decide to convert to Catholicism. I tell myself that I'm following in the footsteps of Oscar Wilde and Auden. But I'm also afraid that I will be instantly recognized as a homo and expelled from the Church. I also realize that I will also probably be expelled from the Left.

To convert, I need to attend a course known as the Rite of Catholic Initiation for Adults (RCIA). The course meets every

27 Mansoor, "*The Outsider* Unpacks the Controversy Behind the National September 11 Memorial & Museum."

28 Quotes by Kennicott and Cotter from Witt, "What the 9/11 Museum Remembers."

Sunday after Mass in the Church of the Immaculate Conception, right next door to my building.

Ironically, the Immaculate Conception is covered in soot. The soot is caused by the heavy 14th Street traffic, but there's a McDonald's next door, which creates the sense that the Church is covered in burger grease.

Inside, the vaulted baby blue ceilings feel like heaven.

* * *

It's the morning of the Gay Pride Parade, and the golden hour sun streams through the skyscrapers of Midtown. I sit in a circle on the ground, on a closed-off street in the West 40s. We're like kids coloring, as me and the Occupy folks prepare our signs with cardboard and markers.

In bubble letters, I write: "Marx, Not Madonna." I think that I'm real cute, opposing the commercialization of queer protest.

We march down Fifth Avenue in front of the crowds, chanting and dancing toward Stonewall.

Later, historians will say that Occupy changed the discourse and momentarily intervened in the appropriation of public space.

A middle-aged guy with sunken cheeks asks me, "Why not Marx *and* Madonna?"

* * *

In my RCIA class, there are five other students, aged twenty to forty. The teacher is a plump, well-meaning, middle-aged white lady. The other students have all been obliged to join the Church, in order to marry their Catholic fiancées, and they seem to have no genuine interest in spiritual questions.

I resent the double standard, how I'm actually drawn to the Church, but scared to mention that I live next door with my boyfriend and am converting out of my envy for his faith.

Every class, the well-meaning lady babbles for an hour about God's plan for the family. Sometimes she gives us handouts that

summarize stories from the Bible, about all of the dysfunctional families that precede Christ (the Fall of Adam and Eve, Cain killing his brother, Lot's daughters fucking him, etc.).

After a few months of boring classes, it's time to take the first official step in the conversion process. There's a special Mass, in which all of the RCIA students will be anointed with oil, and that will make us into catechumens.

I stand in front of the altar under the heaven blue vault. The priest smears oil on my forehead. Inexplicably, I burst out laughing. The priest scowls.

* * *

Joey and I receive a letter from our landlord announcing a huge spike in the rent. We need to move far away from the Village. Consequently, I need to resign my position on the Community Board, and it becomes impractical for me to continue attending the RCIA classes on 14th Street. My brief political career, and my foray into Catholicism, come to an end as we relocate uptown.

* * *

During my year at Fordham in the medieval studies program, I feel, as per usual, more attached to the architecture than to my classmates and teachers.

Fordham's Bronx campus — constructed when the Bronx was still a farming community — is in a bustling neighborhood that throbs with pawnshops. Carnival barkers are shouting into megaphones (in English and Spanish) about buying gold. A high wall with security checkpoints closes off the university from the city, like a Green Zone in the middle of conquered territory.

Every once in a while, campus security sends out a formulaic email about someone being murdered in nearby Little Italy.

* * *

Joey hates Washington Heights. He blames me for the move, because I earn less money than him, so it's my fault that we can't stay Downtown. He takes offense at the shul next door where lanky Orthodox boys play basketball in gym shorts and tzitzit.

I like living in the Heights, because it feels like a distended version of the Middle Ages. It looks as if somebody clicked and dragged on the corner of a medieval village and stretched it out of all proportion.

The parish church contains the mummified body of a saint in a glass box. The street grid is fractured by roaming cliffs of steely blue schist, and gigantic housing projects are stylized as quaint Tudor chalets, propped along the edges of the cliffs on gargantuan pylons. In the park, there's a reconstructed Cloister — the medieval wing of the Metropolitan Museum — and the paths of the park are littered with used condoms, empty lube packets, and poopy toilet paper.

Living at a remove from the city, I develop a case of what I call "HOMO." The hope of missing out.

* * *

The Archdiocese begins to renovate St. Patrick's Cathedral. The project will cost over $200 million dollars. It turns the Cathedral into a gentrified tourist trap.

Inside and out, the renovations destroy the cathedral's aura. The constitutive elements of Gothic architecture are fundamentally about creating a stark play between light and shadow.

For August Rodin, the Gothic style uses "strongly projecting surfaces" to create an effect of "light and shade" in which "every part invariably stands out or recedes with a fine chiaroscuro." This gives stonework a "living, moving appearance."[29]

Before the renovations, St. Patrick's exemplified this "unique trituration of light, which comes back to the eyes with mysterious softness after penetrating into the abyss."

29 Rodin, "The Gothic."

But the Cathedral is now flooded with antiseptic LEDs. These lights are cold and bright, and they eliminate all shadows. They make the cathedral feel like the inside of a Walmart.

Outside, teams of cleaners set up scaffolds and use sandblasters to scrub off all of the grit. Now that the nooks and crannies of the cathedral are squeaky-clean, it looks flat, has no depth.

Metal detectors are set up at the entrance in order to search the many tourists who visit the Cathedral on vacation.

* * *

Fordham is a wasps' nest of anxiety. Of course, the Jesuits belong to one of the world's most important scholarly traditions, but in the US, they're not respected by the dominant WASP culture and have chips on their shoulders. Most of the professors hold degrees from Yale and Harvard, and they resent that they're stuck in the Bronx. Consequently, the faculty torment their grad students.

My fellow students are all straight and middle class, they're scared to leave campus, and they obey the whims of their advisors. I'm not openly rebellious, just naïve. Hierarchy and subservience are, to me, obviously contrary to the basic aims of education, and I accidentally become a gadfly.

One of my professors calls me a dilettante. Another says I'm too outré for the academy. These insults, borrowed from Italian and French, are clearly homophobic. My profs tell me that if I were a serious scholar, I wouldn't live so far from campus.

* * *

In the dark recesses of the video center at NYU library, I sit and watch a tiny TV set that plays archival footage from 1989, when a crowd of 4,500 AIDS activists protested outside St. Patrick's Cathedral.

Inside, members of ACT UP interrupt the Mass. They're furious about how the Church demonizes homosexuals and uses its vast political clout to stymie safe sex education.

One protestor grabs the Eucharist from the priest, smashes it to bits, and throws it on the floor. Oral histories have shown that the perpetrator, Tom Keane, was a cradle Catholic. In an interview, Keane explains his actions as an outpouring of dialogue within the faith: "I didn't really know what to do, and I think in some sense, some part of me was sort of saying, 'Well, fine. You guys think you can tell us that you reject us, that we don't belong, so I'm going to reject you.'"[30]

In the footage, another member of ACT UP, Ray Navarro, wears a white toga and crown of thorns and shouts, "We want to go to Heaven, too!"

These engagements with the Church are lay theologies — not just actions *against* the Church, but dialogues within the Church. Keane and Navarro resignified Catholic tropes to demand justice.

* * *

I take courses on medieval Latin in a collegiate Gothic building known as Dealy Hall. Its exterior is medievalist (with stonework ornamentation). But its interior is all sheetrock and drop ceilings and fluorescent lights. The confused architecture is an objective correlative for the overall crisis of the humanities, the contradictions of the Church, and the anxieties of Fordham.

In the late nineteenth century, US colleges like Fordham began to model themselves after medieval Oxbridge, deploying the Gothic nostalgically. Just as this moment, colleges modernized, moved away from the traditional, medieval-ish humanities curriculum, and became modern research universities. By the mid-twentieth century, universities became the R&D wing of the Department of Defense, but also sites of anti-imperialist protest. Dealey's bland interior, so starkly contrasting with the ornate Gothic exterior, expresses how the university is both a high-minded castle or cloister for the ruling classes, mixed with the bland virtues of capital (cleanliness, democracy, efficiency).

30 Keane, *ACT-UP Oral History Project.*

Confused in its purpose, gentrified medievalism is the university's sepulcher.

* * *

I'm trying to write a thesis about medieval gender, and trying to write a book of poems, and I realize that in order to write, I need more mental discipline, so I try meditation. Downtown, the Dharma Punks lecture me about being non-attached. I sit cross-legged on a wooden floor with two dozen middle-aged punks. We're in some apartment building on First Avenue. We regulate our breathing and empty our minds. I feel bored, and it's uncomfortable to pack together on a crowded floor.

After the meditation, some of us go out for dinner. They want to go the Whole Foods buffet. We pack up our plates with quinoa and kale and sit at one of those tables upstairs. The conversation is staid, without any affect. Nobody raises their voice, nobody laughs, everyone is so full of compassion. One guy mentions that he stopped doing Zen because it was too repressed.

* * *

My art history professor takes our class on a tour of the Cloisters Museum. After the tour, she cautions: "Don't walk through the park, whatever you do. Because it's super sketchy. Please order a cab!"

I set off through the park to look for sex, and then pray at the shrine of the mummified saint.

* * *

I start to believe that, by studying medieval mysticism, I'm becoming like my great gay hero, Oscar Wilde.

In 1895, Wilde was sent to jail for "crimes of gross indecency." His life suddenly took a medieval turn.

Every afternoon for a year, Wilde wept, from two to two-thirty. This moment marked, for Wilde, the most humiliating moment in his martyrdom — when on his journey to prison he stood on a train platform in cuffs and chains, "for all the world to look at." Like a medieval saint, Wilde received the gift of tears.

In jail, Wilde reread many medieval books, including Augustine's *Confessions*. His prison letter, *De profundis,* is a florilegium of medieval allusions, with references to Abelard and Dante. He wrote that he wished for "the cowl of the monk" and hoped to join a monastery.

On his deathbed, Wilde converted to Catholicism. He died a pauper and was given a simple burial. But nine years after his death, Wilde's friends arranged to erect a proper monument for the great writer. When they disinterred his body, it was found to be miraculously incorruptible.[31]

* * *

Joey and I receive yet another letter from yet another our landlord announcing a huge spike in the rent. We break up. He moves back to the Village; I head to Brooklyn.

31 See Quigley, *The Corpse: A History.*

PART III

Wandering Endlessly in the Deserts of Slippage

I try another Buddhist group that has a meditation center around Union Square. The group, Soka Gakkai, is from Japan. These Buddhists are worldly and brag that Tina Turner and Art Garfunkel are members. These Buddhists believe that anyone can become rich and famous, if they chant a magic formula and donate a chunk of their income to their beloved founder.

After the meditation, some of us go out for dinner, and then to someone's apartment for more chanting of the magic formula. In the apartment, I'm introduced to Courtney. She starts to rant at me about how Geffen Records has screwed her over, shrieking at me about Kurt's legacy, as if I know who these people are, which of course I do, but not in the way that she seems to think.

* * *

The Empire State Building casts a shadow over the CUNY Graduate Center on Fifth Avenue. The Grad Center's architecture is a spatial metaphor for how — as Thorstein Veblen pointed out in *The Higher Learning in America* — higher education in the US

has historically relied on bureaucracy in order to avoid resolving its basic contradictions, its core conflict between democracy and capitalism.

The building was once a Fifth Avenue department store, opened in 1906. It still has a gorgeous exterior of limestone — Italian Renaissance Revival columns and an arcaded base. But inside, the interior is gut-renovated.

Biege carpets. Biege walls. Biege drop ceilings. Biege is not even a color, but an enabling fiction of white supremacy.

There are thirteen floors, and each floor is identical to the others. And each is symmetrical, so that the building is a maze of beige cubicles that are indistinguishable from one another, except for signs that say "Biology" or "Philosophy."

* * *

When I walk through the Village, I daydream about making a movie of "The Canterville Ghost," set in the condos that have replaced the hospital.

Wilde's short story is an exemplary case of the gentrified medieval at an intersection with the queer. It starts with a real estate scheme: a wealthy American family buys a British mansion. A ghost has haunted the mansion for centuries, driving denizens to their deaths. But the Americans are too modern to be scared. They write scientific papers about the ghost and discuss him abstractly as a case of abnormal psychology. They use commodity products to remove his ghastly blood stains.

The ghost is a flamboyant diva, who murdered his wife because she didn't set his table properly. His spectral displays are magnificent dramatic performances with brilliant costume changes, but the performance is lost on the daft Americans who shrug at him with repressive tolerance.

* * *

The Graduate Center's architecture means that, every time I step into the building, I'm lost.

Every month for five years, I visit the Graduate Center to consult with my dissertation advisor. Since all of the floors and offices look exactly the same, I always forget the way. It's not unlike how the university always manages to lose my stipend check, which sometimes goes unpaid for as long as six months while I subsist on lentils.

Veblen pointed out that universities use bureaucracy to diffuse the innate tension between academic disciplines, which don't really have shared values. Rather than working through conflict, the university levels the philosophical differences between the sciences and the humanities and ends up feeling spiritually vacuous and easily coopted by the capitalist power structure. Beige is the color of liberalism.

It's this condition — how the university seems to embody a lack of direction, a lack of meaning — that drives me, like many of my colleagues, to fanaticism.

* * *

Yoga doesn't appeal to me, because it's just breathing and non-attachment. I strongly believe in attachment, and downward dog makes me homicidal.

Finally, for the sake of developing more discipline, I settle on lifting weights in the college gym.

Lifting weights is also boring and repetitive, but at least I can sneak a peek in the locker room at the undergrads.

* * *

The English Department is another beige box, completely flooded with cold fluorescent lights. There's a podium and folding chairs, and the folding chairs are filled with my colleagues. Almost all of my colleagues are white.

During the first semester of my PhD program, several of my colleagues draft a petition. The petition accuses the program of systematic racism. My colleagues cite how the demographics of

the program don't reflect the racial diversity of the city. They call for drastic changes.

Of course, I sign the petition. When my colleagues set up a meeting with the program chair, I make sure to attend.

A white girl is standing in the lounge, at the mic. She is ABD, studying Baldwin. Her family, she screams into the mic, would gladly take her in, if she ever needed to drop out of school, and they would even liquidate their assets to help her. But Black students, she exhorts, don't have the same privilege. She starts to cry. Her mascara runs.

Another student is inconsolable. He sits in one of the folding chairs, sobbing. Two colleagues hold him by the shoulders. He says something about how, as a person of color, he is the only one taking any responsibility, and it's not fair to him.

I have my suspicions about the guy who styles himself as Kevin Ernesto; he has been ABD for over ten years and seems to think that he is the revolutionary vanguard whom we've all been waiting for. Kevin Ernesto takes the mic and accuses the program Chair of being a white supremacist.

The chair is a mild-mannered, middle-aged queen. He is very short, which I find endearing, and has a little paunch. The chair would clearly rather be at his desk writing another monograph about queerness in Shakespeare. I admire how he takes a deep breath and says, thank you so much, Kevin Ernesto, for your feedback, which I want you to know, I take very, very seriously.

I leave the meeting and walk across 34th Street and up to Times Square. I stop inside one of the last remaining sex clubs, next to the *New York Times* building. The club is a series of walk-in booths with red lights above the doors. Inside the booths, if you pay a dollar, a TV begins to play porn, and a curtain is raised to show the guy in the booth next door. If you don't pay a dollar, the attendant can see from the red indicator light, and he yells, "Put money put money put money!"

I put my dollar in and jerk off, watching the guys in the booths to my left and right. I take a solemn vow that I will avoid my colleagues at all costs. I will never attend another depart-

ment meeting. Later I will regret that, once again, I've connected more with space than with people.

* * *

Through CUNY's English Department listserv, I meet fellow grad students who are also tired of the Jacobins in our program, and I'm invited to attend Mass and eat breakfast with them.

I'm not officially a Catholic — I'm an RCIA dropout — but I go to Mass with the traddy Catholic graduate students. They all belong to a lay organization that's called Communion and Liberation. Back in Italy, kids from Communion and Liberation still sometimes break out into street wars with Communist students.

Here in the US, they hold weekly potlucks and read books by their beloved founder, a theologian named Luigi Giussani.

Once a week, we all meet around dawn outside of Penn Station, where morning commuters from Long Island and New Jersey are pouring into the city.

We go to Mass on West 31st at St. Francis of Assisi. The Franciscans follow in the footsteps of their founder, who renounced his father and paraded naked through the streets of Assisi. Every year at the Gay Pride Parade, the Franciscan fathers join the festivities.

The Franciscans hold morning Mass in the basement of the church, which is retro like grandma's den with futuristic confessionals of faux wooden paneling and booths with red lights above the doors.

After Mass, we hang out at one of those Korean/French-fusion pastry shops in the mid-30s, which is somehow both antiseptic and filthy. Sipping espressos, my new friends make clear that they don't really respect how the Franciscans carry on, but it's the Mass closest to the university. They gossip about the city's many parishes, rating different performances of the liturgy like a kind of Yelp review for the Mass.

* * *

Through the traddy Catholic breakfast club for alienated grad students, I meet Stephen. Stephen is a rail-thin nerd with heavy glasses and a soft voice. He tries to hide his frailty and fear with a thin beard and a penchant for quoting Camille Paglia and Saint Thomas.

I recognize Stephen's sorrow as akin to my own, and I forgive him when he says things that are stupid and racist. We share a common interest in medieval mysticism, and in gay Catholics like Wilde.

I can't help but feel intrigued by Stephen's commitment to celibacy. I admire how he speaks of his celibacy as a sacrifice for God, like the medieval saints. To me, this seems like a queer practice, if not a gay one — a non-normative and therefore to me honorable way of living one's sexuality.

* * *

At breakfast we often compare the city's different Catholic parishes. As though we're elite consumers, we complain about the microphone feedback at the Church of Saint Brigid. We complain especially about the Monastery of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel, where the priest sometimes uses his sermon to tell stories about people having their kidneys stolen while on vacation in Los Vegas.

* * *

One of my fellow grad students writes a shitty comment about me on Facebook. I delete my Facebook, and don't use social media for the next ten years.

For the next ten years, I'll be checked out from the controversies that, I understand, are enraging absolutely everybody on the planet on an almost minute-by-minute basis.

* * *

Stephen is younger than me, so I want to believe that he's going to grow out of his crumby opinions. Also, he's always talking about how he wants to "accompany" and "witness" me, and how he wants to "share with me in the mystery of encounter."

I recognize this as cult language. Stephen, along with everyone else in the breakfast group, constantly reads Giussani. And they repeat Giussani's platitudes with a knowing, insider's tone, as if they are full of wisdom — always saying how they have "encountered reality" and "encountered the neighbor in their innate mystery" and "had an encounter" — which finally is just mystifying gibberish. But I want it to be true that Stephen and I are spiritual friends, that we are accompanying each other in the mystery.

* * *

My apartment in Bushwick is in the parish of St. Martin of Tours/Our Lady of Lourdes. The parish has been formed by consolidation (merging two parishes into one). One side of the parish is a predominantly Black neighborhood. The other side of the parish is a predominantly Dominican neighborhood. The parish's resources are clearly being funneled toward the Dominican side.

I live on the Black side of the parish, the Our Lady of Lourdes side, which has been successively attacked by several waves of ghettoization and gentrification.

On the Black side is the former parish school, which has recently been converted into a privately run charter school.

Still functioning are an art deco convent, where a handful of elderly nuns live. But this so-called "chapel" is not a quaint sanctuary. It's at the dead end of Furman Avenue, where, perched high on a retaining wall, a life-sized statue of the Virgin beams out, smiling and prayerful. On both sides of her, two yellow street signs rather forebodingly proclaim: "END."

* * *

Stephen invites me to go to the beach in New Jersey where he grew up in the suburbs. He's writing some kind of book about how the suburbs instill repressive values, which is a foregone conclusion.

I take the train across the river with a canvas bag of trunks and lotion and meet Stephen at a commuter rail station in New Jersey. We hop in Stephen's mom's sedan and head to the beach, where I assume that we'll enjoy the sun and sea.

As Stephen and I lie on our towels in the sand, he points out a cheap motel up the boardwalk and remarks that gay men go there to do gross things. Then from his canvas bag he produces a giant tome, *Theology of the Body* by Pope John Paul II. Stephen wants us to take turns reading it aloud together — his idea of a date.

The water is cold, and there's a breeze, and I don't feel like swimming.

Stephen props his head up on his hand, reclining and reading.

"Did I ever tell you," he asks, "what my therapist told me to do?" He says the word *therapist* hatefully, like an indictment.

"He said," Stephen speaks through gritted teeth, furious, "that I should try putting a carrot in my anus."

"Yeah," I say, "lots of people do that."

I realize that Stephen is not, in fact, celibate. He's not, as he says, making any kind of sacrifice. Stephen is celibate, not because he is burning with desire and has nobly decided to live chaste, but because he finds sex and intimacy revolting. Stephen is lying to himself, and to me, and to God. But again, since I'm so desperate myself for connection, I let it go; I understand that Stephen, like me, is a lonely and confused fag who's been hurt by a cruel world and doesn't know how to live a meaningful, gay life.

* * *

Most Sundays in my neighborhood, I walk over to the Dominican side of the parish. Along the railroad track there's a used

condom and a few blunt wrappers. Next to the graveyard, under the train overpass, an enterprising unhoused person has built a home for himself out of plywood.

Most of the old industrial buildings are empty, except for the mattress factory. The mattress factory's business model is unclear to me. The warehouse is stacked with poopy old mattresses, and a sign outside says, "We don't accept mattresses that are delivered in shopping carts!"

* * *

When Stephen reads an early draft of this book, he tells me that I'm like the Virgin Mary. In the Gospels, it's said several times that the Virgin looked upon the life of her son and "guarded all these things in her heart."

Stephen says that I'm like her, and congratulates me on my draft. But he asks me to please change his name throughout the manuscript to a pseudonym and suggests Eric.

* * *

St. Vincent Ferrer's is located on the Upper East Side, one of the richest zip codes in the world. The church is gorgeous and Gothic, and everyone in the breakfast club agrees that it's the most exquisite Mass in the city. Stephen brags that Andy Warhol attended Mass every day at St. Vincent Ferrer's. Stephen gushes about Warhol, how Warhol was also a traddy Catholic, committed to chastity.

I read right-leaning, religious magazines and blogs, which regularly repeat stories about how Warhol was "secretly" pious and strictly "celibate."[1] This description of Warhol causes me to feel confused about my daily dalliances in the Bloomingdale's basement. I wonder if, as a gay avant-garde artist, I shouldn't aspire to be more like Warhol, stricter and more traditional.

1 See Strouse, "Warhol's Queer Catholicism."

* * *

Stephen's reactionary views take a subtle form. He's prone to making remarks about how ethnic people are somehow more innocent and natural and romantic than WASPs.

I assume that Stephen means well. Because Stephen and I are sitting across the breakfast table from each other, and looking at one another face to face, our arguments feel enlivening. The discussion never becomes acrimonious. When Stephen says that Black people know how to dance so well, because it's in their genetics, I try to patiently explain. When Stephen says that he thinks that AIDS might be nature's punishment for sodomy, I don't even know yet that he's publishing these horrible opinions on right-wing blogs. I just think he is a tormented fag who is sitting across from me at breakfast in a Korean/French-fusion pastry shop in the mid-30s.

* * *

Gentrified space is an incongruent juxtaposition: the romantic macabre of abandoned factories, and the generic, brutalist tenements of the 1950s, and the generic, pomo condos of the 2000s.

Crossing Central Avenue, my neighborhood is mostly Dominicans, some Puerto Ricans. And on street corners, spray-painted murals proudly display the flags of both.

The church of St. Martin of Torres is grandiose. At the corner of a quaint park, St. Martin's is an epic, neoclassical temple, filled with the luminescence of stained-glass windows and giant, gilded columns.

Every pew is filled; it's standing room only. The priest is a straight-backed Torquemada, who delivers scorching homilies, crafted with Ciceronian elegance and Thomistic precision.

On my walk back home, a sedan is parked outside the mattress factory and through the car window I see a guy watching porn on his cell and jerking off, and he invites me to get in the sedan with him.

* * *

The arcane academic field of Medieval Studies is having a brief moment in the limelight, and making headlines in major newspapers, thanks to Milo Yiannopoulos.

Milo makes a name for himself by touring US campuses, saying hateful things, and filming the ensuing controversies. Milo is gay, flamboyant, and wears pearls. Stephen says that Milo is just like Wilde.

This is one of the anti-intellectual affectations that Stephen has picked up from Paglia — a stupid belief in archetypes, a tendency to plug everybody into a category with no regard for specificity. It's patently obvious that Milo has nothing of Wilde's erudition or talent or sense of social justice. Milo becomes famous by hurling nasty insults at nineteen-year-old Gender Studies majors.

* * *

Some Sundays I walk to the other side of the neighborhood, deeper into Brownsville, along the heavy traffic of Eastern Parkway to the church of Our Lady of the Presentation.

Outside, the Presentation looks stately with its red brick façade and its roof of patinaed bronze. But the interior is cinderblock walls and a series of streetlamps. It feels like a parking lot.

At the Presentation, the parishioners are all African American, but the priest is a middle-aged white man. He tries hard to finesse the obviously racist conditions by selecting hymns from the Black Gospel tradition and making sure in his sermons to always cite Martin Luther King, Jr.

* * *

Desperate for attention, Milo teams up with a right-wing medievalist professor at the University of Chicago, Rachel Fulton Brown. Together, Milo and Fulton Brown issue a series of half-

baked blog screeds about how studying the Middle Ages is key to saving Western civilization, which apparently is under dire threat of extinction.

My Catholic breakfast friends, particularly Stephen, become enamored of Milo. What makes Milo attractive is that he has the benefit of great foils. Liberalism is hypocritical and cowardly and repressed, and entirely racist in its own way. So, it feels refreshing, for the time being, that someone would take the stage and spew a lot of venomous nonsense. Soon enough, Milo's star will fade, but his style of demagoguery will send the entire country into a period of total disorder.

* * *

One afternoon, I meet with my professor in his beige office. He wears beige khakis and a starched shirt. I tell him that I want to write my dissertation about circumcision. He tells me that the topic is "reactionary."

I take the subway back to Brooklyn, where I sit at my desk and angrily open up a Word doc and save it on my desktop as "Revenge.docx." For the next four years, almost without pause, I write furiously.

* * *

My favorite Mass is in Williamsburg, where the neighborhood has undergone several waves of gentrification.

The Church charges a special mission of Franciscan Friars to evangelize to the hipsters. The Friars open a barbecue joint and start hosting parties with Lime-A-Ritas and R&B music.[2]

At San Damiano, Brother Frank lisps through his homily and snaps like a queen. I think he is winking at me as he reads from the Gospels.

2 Pearis, "Brooklyn's San Damiano Mission Courts Younger Parishioners with Live Music & More."

When the congregation at San Damiano doesn't grow, the bean counters at the Archdiocese decide to terminate the project and ship the Friars off.

* * *

A few blocks away from my apartment, down Bushwick Avenue, a Lutheran church has been demolished, its façade retained to adorn a luxury building in a gentrified medievalist assemblage.

Before the fresh concrete has dried, someone scratches into the sidewalk: "Fuck Gentrification."

* * *

All of my Catholic friends are reading the hottest bestseller, *The Benedict Option* by Rod Dreher.

Dreher argues that Christians should retreat from the sins of the modern world by living in all-Christian communities. Dreher claims that his plan is based on the model of medieval monasticism pioneered by Saint Benedict.

The title — *The Benedict Option* — sounds like the ominous codename for some nuclear apocalypse strategy, dreamed up by lunatics at the RAND Corporation.

* * *

While I regularly attend Mass and eat breakfast with the Catholic kids, I also cruise in Bloomingdale's. The contradiction doesn't torment me. But at this point, I assume that Augustine is correct in arguing that it's basically immoral to use bodies for pleasure. As Augustine points out, it's inhumane to use human beings as a means to an end.

Part of what makes this argument persuasive to me is that, of course, I'm a good feminist. And — my flirtation with Catholicism aside — much of what I have received from mainstream liberalism is anti-sex and anti-porn, a suspicion that fucking is ethically problematic for how it objectifies others.

I'm hesitant to fully convert to Catholicism, knowing that I'm not fully reconciled to the Church's teachings.

* * *

Medieval scholars point out that *The Benedict Option* is utterly clueless about the basic historical facts of medieval monasticism. Still, my Catholic friends are taken in by Dreher's rhetoric.

Dreher uses metaphors that proto-fascists made popular almost a century ago. He decries how modern forms of liberty are actually "slavery" and "enslavement." "True freedom," he says, entails "submission to God." Dreher sermonizes against the evil of sodomy, and how democracy has forced innocent Christians to tolerate gays and lesbians, against their own wills and against the laws of God.

Dreher's "option" is, in practical terms, a real estate scheme. He gives pseudo-medievalist cover to how Christian nationalists always try to segregate themselves in gated suburban communities, far away from the sodomites, Jews, and Blacks of the wicked city.

My Catholic friends read Dreher and discuss his book again and again at our weekly breakfasts. They feel persecuted by a society that doesn't understand us. They don't leave the city geographically, but they enact Dreher's gentrifying ethos inside of their hearts.

* * *

One day after Mass, I head to the Village. On 10th Street, the Russian Turkish Baths has been in operation for over a century, since 1982. It was founded back when the tenements of the Lower East Side didn't have running water, and everyone bathed together in public facilities. During the mid-twentieth century, baths throughout the neighborhood became gay hotspots, but the Russian is the only one left.

Like in a Bible story, the Baths are owned by two feuding brothers, David and Boris, who hate one another bitterly and

operate the Baths on alternate weeks. Their dispute seems to hinge upon the questions of identity that emerge through the process of gentrification. Davis is trim and slick, a smooth-talking salesmen who uses GroupOns to promote the Baths to yuppies. But Boris is gruff and chubby, and often screams at clients that they are "fucking idiots," and sadistically turns up the heat in the sauna to full blast, apparently to keep away the fainthearted.

Both Boris and David police the saunas, in order not to run afoul of the Department of Health. Sex is strictly prohibited. But the steam room smells of eucalyptus and balls. Hordes of naked men, all slightly frustrated, surreptitiously grope one another.

I wedge in, shoulder to shoulder, between a hairy, Russian mobster and a clammy, too-cool-for-school hipster. A predatory hedge fund manager is roughly massaging the boney shoulders of a barely legal, rail-thin Hassidic boy with golden blonde Rapunzel sidelocks.

I remember in *The Confessions* how Augustine writes about visiting a bathhouse when he is a boy. Augustine gets a hard-on, and his father, spying the boy's boner, brags about his son's endowment.[3] Augustine embraces the incident as an opportunity to reflect on the deeper meaning of sexuality, and of life.

Through the steam I see, outside in the corridor, beyond the cloudy window, a celestial vision, floating through the meat market. It's a sunny beam of peroxide blonde, Harpo Marx hair: my dear mentor, Wayne.

Wayne and I are no longer officially teacher and student, but we conduct ourselves professionally. We cinch schmattas around our waists and exchange our theoretical, ethnographic observations about the Baths.

I'm in awe of his star power and I'm eager to say something smart. I breathlessly badger him for advice about my dissertation, and about my life. I mention that I fantasize of converting, like Oscar Wilde, to Catholicism on my death bed.

3 Augustine, *Confessions,* II.6.

With his throaty, operatic voice, Wayne counsels, "Why not convert, if you want to, and see what happens."

I'm dizzy from the heat, from all the boners, and from Wayne's aura of queer sagacity. His advice sends me into a mystical transport.

This is a sign, but a sign that doesn't necessarily seek its fulfillment in the signified. I'm reborn, butt-naked, in the bathhouse — sweating between a Gentile banker and a Hassidic bottom — and directed — by the prophetic voice of a great queer, Jewish, deconstructionist gay critic — to pursue a life of faith, however wishy-washy or confused, and to queerly embrace an exile from fulfillment, and to wander endlessly in the desert of slippage.

* * *

Gentrified medievalism wins its fifteen minutes of international fame when the Metropolitan Museum opens its 2018 blockbuster show, *Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination.* The show draws together medieval artifacts with modern fashion.

The exhibit premieres during a major turning point in the commercialization of the museum. Since its founding in 1870, the Met has operated as a public charity and cannot legally charge its visitors. But after winning a lawsuit against the municipal government, the Met now ends its policy of free admission.

A new ticket policy is implemented. The Met will charge $25 to visitors who come from outside of the city. Locals can still "pay what you wish." Like any rational business, the Met prioritizes its paying customers, and the museum starts to feel like a circus, crowded with tourists.

At the ticket desk, I ask for a free ticket and show my university ID. The ticket agent says, "This ID doesn't prove that you actually live in New York City because you could commute to your university from outside the city. And since 9/11, it's been illegal not to show a government-issued ID!"

* * *

Heavenly Bodies makes Catholicism relevant to celebrity culture. Pop stars wear clerical dress to attend the Met Gala. Some Catholic wing nuts complain that the Vatican shouldn't have cooperated with a gay curator, and that Rihanna has no business dressing like a slutty pope. Otherwise, the show is widely celebrated.

The exhibit only shows luxury items. It doesn't acknowledge the Catholic fashion in New York. Street wear, especially among Latinos in the city, is heavy gold, blinged-out chains with saints' medallions, kitschy t-shirts printed with giant images of the Virgin, and plastic Rosaries.

The Met juxtaposes medieval relics with haute couture. The assemblage of medieval and modern is decontextualizing, depoliticizing, and establishes a false equivalence. It insinuates that all of these objects belonged to the same bourgeois system of generalized commodity projection.[4] The exhibition makes no distinction between medieval craft goods (created under feudal conditions) and modern luxury items (created under capitalist conditions). The norms of the capitalist marketplace level the spiritual down to a consumerist plane.

The Church and the Museum collude to sacralize a business ontology. I overhear many visitors complain, "Why doesn't the Church sell these jewels, and help the poor?" Yet, I don't hear any visitors similarly say, "Why doesn't Versace sell these jewels, and help the poor?"

Due to the Met's new admission system, the assemblage of fashion and faith is automatically viewed through the lens of capitalist relations, framing the medieval by crumby market values.

* * *

4 See Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*

I'm assigned to teach a course on "The Queer Middle Ages" at The New School. The department chair seems to think that he's doing me a favor. But the fact is, the university is short-staffed — because it's run by corporate bureaucrats whose mission seems to be to create a university without professors and students — and there's no medievalist on the full-time literature faculty, and there's no queer theorist. So, as an adjunct, I'm being asked to do double duty for a quarter of the pay of my tenured colleagues.

I'm intellectually interested in queer/medieval overlaps, but the course is obviously just a way for the admin to pinch pennies while they line their own pockets.

* * *

Out for a walk, I find myself on Essex Street and need to pee. The market where I used to work is gone. The NYC Economic Development Corporation tore it down and, across the street, opened a swanky, rebranded shopping mall. I enter the new mall, looking for a toilet. There are some of the old vendors, relocated, but overrun by expensive luxury shops for tourists. The restroom door is locked and I need to buy an $8 coffee to get the code.

* * *

The students in my course on "The Queer Middle Ages" are all trans and nonbinary, and they say aloud several times that they think it's offensive that they're being made to study the Middle Ages. They also say aloud that they hate cis-gay white men. All I can think to tell them is, "Those guys never return my texts," which earns me some awkward laughter.

* * *

Catholics responding to the Met exhibit also fall into the trap of representation. Glorifying the "Catholic imagination" has led to

a kind of Catholic fundamentalism that fetishizes ethno-specific cultures, fashion, and regalia. Some of my Catholic friends, for example, complain about the Met Gala when the pop star Rihanna appears in an outfit stylized after liturgical garments. They call her out for "cultural appropriation." But this accusation makes the fatal mistake of agreeing that Catholicism is mere representational "culture." At the point where Rihanna is accused of "appropriating culture," Catholic liturgical vestments have become fetishized commodities in a puritanically moralistic universe, where Rihanna is wicked because she has not taken more ethical responsibility in her consumer choices.

* * *

In the "Queer Middle Ages" course, the students and I float in the fishbowl classroom of all-glass walls. I pull down a screen and project two paintings for the students to examine: *The Virgin with the Host,* by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1852) and *After Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's "The Virgin with the Host,"* by Kehinde Wiley (2009).

Quizzically and quietly, a student who goes by Art mutters, "Oh my God?"

Then, resoundingly and with realization: "Oh. My. GOD!"

The student's reaction leaves the classroom in shocked silence. I wonder what has provoked this outburst.

* * *

The next time that I'm cruising at the Bobst Library, I look up the "Catholic Imagination" and "Heavenly Bodies" in the catalogue. I find a book titled *Heavenly Bodies: Remembering Hollywood and Fashion's Favorite AIDS Benefit* from 1996.[5]

The volume tells how a team of activists developed a series of runway shows that raised money for people with AIDS. When I sit down at a carrel to read *Heavenly Bodies,* I don't expect the

5 Anketell, *Heavenly Bodies.*

book to mention any Catholic themes. But an anecdote about the church, in large letters, takes up the first page in full.

The story — a vignette about the silent film starlet Tallulah Bankhead — takes place at a Catholic funeral. A priest swings an incense carrier. And Tallulah quips, "I love your dress, but your purse is on fire."

This story is not related to the text that follows. *Heavenly Bodies* contains no further mention of the tale. But in the context of a book dedicated to people with AIDS, the story points to a deeper connection between queer sensibility and the Catholic imagination: not only an enthusiasm for froofy outfits, but also an antinomian desire to mock pieties and laugh at a funeral.

* * *

In Ingres's painting, a snow white Virgin stands behind an altar. Mary gazes upon the Eucharist. Her hands are in prayer.

Wiley is famous for painting handsome Black men (most notably, the official portrait of President Obama). In Wiley's *After Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's "The Virgin with the Host,"* a man stands in the same pose. He gazes at the viewer quizzically but firmly, apparently comfortable with being gazed at and returning the viewer's gaze, his eyes communicating a masculine strength of self-possession that is somehow not at odds with the soft feminine colors of his pink and purple windbreaker. His hands, folded in prayer, are held out in front of him at a physical distance — with a gesture of formality — that makes the hands seem almost detached from his body. Flowers from the background push forward into the plane of the foreground and begin to envelop him, matching the pattern on the brim of his hat and rhyming with the tattoo on his forearm.

Trying to be Socratic, I ask the student, "Could you please say more?"

"Um, oh my God?" Art repeats, as if this explains everything.

Art collects his thoughts, stuttering, spurting: "I'm gay. And I'm an F-to-M transman. And I'm from the Dominican Republic, but I live in the US. And I'm a Catholic. And none of that

makes any fucking sense — to me or to my family or to anybody else. But with these paintings, my whole world makes complete fucking sense!"

* * *

In August, 2017, white supremacists hold a rally in Charlottesville. They carry tiki torches and scream vicious slogans. They maim and murder. Some of them carry medieval heraldry.

Major papers report on the relationship between medievalism and white Christian nationalism. Liberal medievalists sound the alarm, decrying how racists have appropriated the Middle Ages.

In fact, the Middle Ages don't even exist, except as the construction of a racist historiography. Modern Europeans invented the idea of the "Middle Ages" as a romantic origin myth.

* * *

Talking with Stephen at breakfast, I think that I can understand — even if I can't agree — why Stephen is enamored by Milo and the far-right.

Stephen's sexual conflicts mean that he's constitutionally unable to experience heightened emotions. He's never been in love, he's never had his heart broken, and he's never even orgasmed. He's a case study in what Reich, Fromm, and Adorno described as the authoritarian personality — someone who is so weak and unfulfilled, that he can only realize himself by worshipping tyrants.

Stephen's only real thrill in life — besides, I guess, taking Communion and reading about the martyrs — is watching jerks like Milo inflict cruelty on others. Since Stephen himself is a self-loathing waif, he gets off on Milo being a bully.

* * *

In his lifetime, Ingres was ridiculed for being "too medieval."[6] I can relate.

* * *

I wish I were closer friends with Miller Oberman, a fellow queer medievalist. Sometimes we run into each other on the street and exchange pleasantries, but we never seem to find time to meet up. I study his poems.

In *The Unstill Ones,* Miller translates Old English poems about ruined cities, and uses Old English forms to write trans-medievalist elegies about spaces destroyed by gentrification and deracinated by tourism.

In "The City," he writes that the city "was a ruin even / before it was a ruin." The lines hit me like tough love, a truth I need to hear but don't want to face. My story about gentrification has been a lie — a nostalgic, reactionary refusal to accept the fact that the Middle Ages are a fascistic historical construction, that there were never any good old days in New York City before capitalism, that it has been a ruin since its genocidal founding by slave-holding puritanical goons.

* * *

In Ingres's *The Virgin Adoring the Host,* Mary appears behind the altar, as if she were a priest, transubstantiating the Eucharist.

Ingres uses this implicit juxtaposition to insinuate that Mary is the priest par excellence, who has brought the body of Christ into the world. Giving of herself, Mary becomes the very self-offering of the eucharistic sacrifice, the priest who is Eucharist who is *Christ*.[7]

But in Ingres, the Eucharist, too, is Christ — that white circle, as white as Mary's flesh (and made from Mary's own flesh), cuts a hole in the composition, piercing through the painting

6 See Nees, *Early Medieval Art*.

7 See O'Donnell, "The Flesh of Mary and the Body of Christ."

and into Mary's mystical womb, where all identity categories fall away to love. Ingres's Eucharist is white, like his depiction of Mary. But the logic of transubstantiation — by which a white cracker can become God's unifying body — allows, also, that a white *cracker* can identify with a Black man.

* * *

After Trump wins the election, it becomes fashionable to say that liberal New Yorkers "live in a bubble." This is a self-serving distortion.

The "bubble" is yet another means to avoid accountability. It denies an obvious geographic fact: New York is the center of American greed and racism, and the wealthy patrons of both parties, as well as Trump and the Clintons, are all based in New York.

The metaphor of the "bubble" supposes that liberal white New Yorkers are ethereal and heavenly, like innocent angels, who float above the world. What's called a bubble is actually the violence of segregation and gentrification.

* * *

Wiley's artistic practice is a mix of queer urban cruising and the medieval. He picks up his subjects on the streets, brings them back to his studio, and asks them to cruise, as well, by flipping through art history books to pick their favorite painting, which will then become the basis for their portrait.

To my eye, Wiley's floral patterns resemble medieval tapestries. Wiley delineates his trippy flowers with a draughtsman's precision, weaving together a Photoshopped acid trip that challenges normative perspectives, and sends me into seventh heaven.

In Wiley's paintings, flowers flash between background and foreground, electrically flowing, flattened but fluctuating, folding over the central figure.

This is the effect of the millefleur patterns of fifteenth-century tapestry, where flowers subsume the composition. They grow naturalistically, as if in the foreground, and fill the space decoratively, as if in the background, psychedelically blurring subject and object, decorative backdrop and scenic element.

* * *

Stephen describes Milo as a path toward salvation. I'm morbidly curious about Stephen's relationship with Milo, and I listen to him with a friendly concern for Stephen's well-being and a rubbernecked fascination with his attraction for Milo.

Stephen's theological point, which is half-right, is that liberal society is so uptight that it prohibits people from acting out their innate wickedness, and this, in turn, prevents people from coming into redemption.

Of course, a vast body of Leftist historical scholarship has shown that liberalism is hypocritical. Stephen isn't wrong to argue that bourgeois codes of decency are self-serving and actually disguise violence.

He has come to believe that being openly vile is preferrable to double-dealing liberal pieties, and it's tempting to agree. Unfortunately, Stephen and half of the country falls into this temptation, believing that, while Milo and Trump are despicable creeps, at least they're honest about it.

* * *

At the Bobst Library, I sit at a carrel as far away from the empty atrium as possible. I read a review of Wiley's work by Brian Keith Jackson, who explains that Wiley's painterly lyricism is beyond narrative and beyond time, where all moments exist as one. Jackson's reading of Wiley imagines the paintings as existing in an eternity beyond "beginning, middle and end" — the lyricism of Augustinian composition, which reveals universality beyond identitarian distinction. For Jackson, Wiley is like Saint Judas, who "wanted to stick his finger in the sore of the landscape,"

as though the whole world were the tortured body of Christ, as though the anonymous boys in the street were God in the flesh.[8]

I put down my book and step away from the carrel, walking through the stacks to shield myself from the empty atrium and popping into the men's room where an undergraduate and I share a Stephen Dedalus/Leopold Bloom moment.

* * *

Attending Mass, I recite my favorite line of poetry: "Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed." I'm drawn to the idea that imperfection and perfection suffuse into one another. Like Stephen, I believe in the concept of sin, because it opens the way to redemption.

* * *

Before Mass on Sunday, I get my beard trimmed at the Dominican barber. Saúl doesn't speak very good English, and I don't speak very good Spanish, but he drapes a cape over me and sets to work on my facial hair.

Saúl strategically rubs his package against my hand, where my hand lies on the armrest under the cape. Tucked into the corner of his mirror is an icon of the Lord on the Cross.

* * *

The RCIA classes, like before, are insufferably tedious. After Mass we meet next door to the church in a kid's classroom at tiny desks. The walls are covered in finger paintings. Most sessions are spent waiting for late classmates to arrive. Then we wait while our teacher, Alberto, thumbs through his Bible while stroking his thick white mustache. He's trying to find some passage that he wants to cite but can't remember.

8 Jackson, "The Promise of Life, The Life of Promise," 5, 10.

* * *

Some members of the medievalist profession begin to object to the term "Anglo-Saxon." They point out that the term is a point of identification for members of white supremacist prison gangs.

The medievalist profession becomes starkly divided in a polarized debate. Conservative members of the profession insist on using the term. They seem principally motivated by spite, defensiveness, or habit.

I feel no emotional investment in the term "Anglo-Saxon" and simply swap the term out of my vocabulary, using "Old English" instead. But I think it's too easy to quibble over semantics, without confronting how the prison-industrial complex perpetuates racism by coercing people into joining gangs along racial lines.

* * *

Sitting at a tiny desk in the RCIA classes, I fidget and stare at the clock. Never does Alberto deploy any pedagogical strategy except idle rambling. So, it's totally out of the blue when, one Sunday, Alberto asks us to all "go around the circle and everybody share what we think about homosexuals."

Sitting next to Alberto, stuffed into a preschool desk, is a gruff papi chulo in a Yankees cap who shrugs, "I don't judge."

A middle-aged secretary waves off the question, "They're just born that way."

The circle is closing in on me, and I need to put my thoughts together.

Someone offers: "My cousin is gay, and he says love is love."

I wonder if I should cite Augustine, or if I should just start screaming that sex needs no justification, that everyone in this room is a sodomite by the medieval definition.

As more people weigh in with insipid platitudes, I feel like I'm caught between mushy liberalism and hard-right orthodoxy.

I'm converting to Catholicism because I crave some kind of spiritual structure; but there's nothing on offer, except fire-and-brimstone or repressive tolerance.

When my turn comes, I just say, "I'm gay, and I don't really know."

"Well," Alberto says, "God bless you!"

It's not exactly a revelation, more like a reprieve.

* * *

Like a revelation, YouTube's algorithms connect me with an enchanting music video by Blood Orange. The song, "Augustine," is a sensual and upbeat dance. The video takes place in Washington Square and eulogizes Trayvon Martin by borrowing lines from Augustine's *Confessions*.

Blood Orange plays at the keys of an imaginary keyboard on the trunk of a moving car and is playing at no piano. He narrates:

> Late have I loved and chose to see
> […] Cry and burst my deafness
> While Trayvon falls asleep[9]

These lines come from Book X, where Augustine explains that time is made up of broken bits that are held together by eternity. He explains this fragmentation by an analogy to how we remember poems.[10]

* * *

As part of the RCIA process, I need to give my first confession. I've only ever seen confessions in soap operas and police procedurals, which overrepresent Catholicism in the US beyond its actual demographic proportions, because it's the only flavor of Christianity that really lends itself to television intrigues.

To my disappointment, my confession doesn't take place in a cherrywood booth of carved Gothic traceries. Instead, I sit in a

9 Hynes, "Blood Orange."

10 Carruthers, *Book of Memory,* 245–46.

pew toward the front of the church, under the blue vault. An elderly priest, his small hands trembling, asks me a few questions. When he is about to dismiss me, I summon the courage to say that I'm gay and live with a man.

The priest pauses, closes his eyes, his tiny hands at his sides, grabbing the edge of the pew. For a while, he meditates.

"You can receive the Eucharist at the Easter Mass," he says, "and afterward, when you have the time, why don't you go to St. Francis of Assisi, and give your confession there."

* * *

Blood Orange's video shows an ensemble of limbs, intermingling and indeterminate, and the suffocated body of Eric Garner, whose twisted body parts are interpenetrated by a swarm of police officers. The image of Garner and the police forms a diabolic body politic — limbs are cropped, contorted, broken — like the zombie bodies of *Get Out,* grafted together through demonic forces.

"Augustine" shows another still photograph. This next image echoes the image of Garner by rearranging many limbs into a body, which is a troupe of Black dancers. They are also organized to become a mass of many limbs. But they are now noble, powerful.

Blood Orange uses this technique of juxtaposed images again when, visually, Augustine himself appears in the video: Augustine and Thelonious Monk are juxtaposed in matching profiles. A cropped image from Botticelli's 1480 painting, *Saint Augustine in His Study,* corresponds compositionally with a 1964 photograph of Monk from the cover of *Time* magazine.[11] Their profiles and hats neatly match, an uncanny comparison.

* * *

11 Notably the *Time* article continually refers to Monk as an actual medieval monk: "Jazz: The Loneliest Monk."

On my way home from my first confession, I walk along the back alley by the mattress factory, and I text Stephen. He accuses my priest of being a corporate bureaucrat who has used the classic strategy of sending me to a different department to avoid his own responsibilities.

I wonder if God is also so repressively tolerant that he would decline to care, one way or the other, about my sex life, and would withhold judgment about what I hold most dear, and what I found most joyful, and most painful.

* * *

In Blood Orange's song, the old is made new again. Lyrical citation brings Augustine into dialogue with Trayvon Martin, as the song celebrates homoerotic love:

> See, Augustine
> Late have I loved and chose to see
> Skin on his skin
> A warmth that I can feel with him

Not necessarily sexual, but embodied and desiring, love is a vector of the desiring soul. Like Augustine's lust for God — restlessly grasping toward many objects, seeking within the created order for the presence of the creator — the lyrics are a flux of desire's quest.

> And no one even told me
> The way that you should feel
> Tell me, did you lose your son?
> Tell me, did you lose your love?
> Cry and burst my deafness
> While Trayvon falls asleep

Desire slips from one human object ("son") to another human object ("love") and then moves back to God by citing Augus-

tine's prayer to the deity, "Cry and burst my deafness." And then, desire moves to a very particular human, Trayvon.

* * *

Blood Orange is playing a mystical piano on the trunk of the car. But suddenly, the driver of the car is no longer joyriding. With a jerk of the camera and a scratch of the record, she is looking fearfully into the brutalizing gaze of a bodycam. Suddenly Blood Orange is in Washington Square Park, singing among a group of dancers. The shot is framed to make Blood Orange's face look like the head for a collective body of limbs and torsos. And as Blood Orange sings, they gesture with their arms, pushing outward as if releasing a spiritual energy. Then the scene cuts quickly away, with a split-second frame that contains a subliminal symbol: a circular hole is burning through the celluloid. This hole, almost imperceptible, appears at the precise location of Blood Orange's torso. It's if a bullet hole has pierced the film. As if a bullet has pierced their body. As if, too, the song has forced this hole into being, distending beyond the tissue of the video, cutting a wormhole into the fabric of spacetime, opening up a paradoxically redemptive wound, juxtaposing the past into the present, letting them touch each other in love, however horrible.

* * *

On the night before Easter, I walk through my neighborhood to St. Martin of Torres, holding hands with Stephen who, though younger than me by a few years, will become my godfather in just a few minutes.

In the Church, I parade under the otherworldly vault in a red gown, chanting the liturgy of the saints. The ritual processes through the entire biblical history of the universe, from Creation to Crucifixion, until, at last, I received the Host in my hand

from the elderly priest who has brushed me off. I become "Augustine."

* * *

I jerk off at Bloomingdale's and, on my walk up Lexington, I use my phone to find a PDF of Warhol's *Diaries*. Scrolling through, I realize that Warhol never attended Mass "secretly." And he was never "celibate."

St. Vincent Ferrer's is located in the city's wealthiest neighborhood, and Warhol visited the church as a place to see and be seen, to rub elbows with other socialites.

Church attendance, for Warhol, was a well-known part of his public persona, and a deliberate public relations strategy (especially because he hoped to nab a commission to paint a portrait of the pope).

Warhol never went to confession, and he only attended Mass for a few minutes at a time, precisely because he hated priests and opposed the Church's teachings on sex.

* * *

I've lived in New York for over a decade but still feel existentially jolted by the skyscrapers of Midtown. Their scale is a hermeneutic. Craning my neck to look up at them means seeing myself from top-down, taking on the perspective of the Leviathan, realizing my transience and meaninglessness relative to the cosmos.

Early one morning, I push through the crowd of Penn Station and find myself on 33rd, passing a houseless man who raves like John the Baptist. In the kitschy basement of St. Francis of Assisi, I wait in line in front of one of the confessional booths that looks like grandma's basement rec center. I speculate about the sins of the people in line. That middle-aged, double-chinned lady must be carrying on an affair with her married boss.

When it's finally my turn to enter the confessional, again it's not the received TV image. A portly friar sits face to face with

me. I explain my situation, that I've converted and I've been sent here because I'm gay.

"As long as you have sex with love," the friar says, "then it isn't a sin."

I perform the prescribed prayers and exit the church into the crowds of Midtown and head over to the Korean pastry shop to have coffee with Stephen. He tells me that the friar has lied to me.

But as a scholar of the Middle Ages, I'm aware that my confessor stands in the role of Christ, and, traditionally, his spiritual advice is absolutely binding. As far as I'm concerned, I do everything with love.

EPILOGUE

Pandemic(s)

There are rumors of plague. But today, the dean is visiting my course. The dean is an expert in the Black novelist Charles Chesnutt. She wears pearls and pulls her hair back into a hard-working ponytail.

The dean, I know, takes home a half-million dollars per year, and she is closely related to a cabinet undersecretary. I depend upon her patronage, so I've invited the dean to give a guest lecture about Chestnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars* from 1900.

Chesnutt's novel shows how, in the American South, racist whites loved to put on Renaissance Fairs and jousting tournaments, pretending that they were knights, and that Dixie was Camelot. Suddenly the dean checks a message on her cellphone, and apologizes, and abruptly leaves for a meeting.

My students are flustered. All of their hands go up with urgent questions. They've read in the newspapers about a strange sickness that is coming from China.

I tell my students not to worry. The security state, I say, is always overemphasizing risk, especially when it affects straight white people. But all experts agree that the mortality rate for the corona virus is exceptionally low. I tell them, this is just like the

invasion of Iraq, and what we should really be upset about is the ongoing failure to adequately respond to HIV/AIDS.

Since the dean has departed early, I let the students leave class. I'm anxious to run my queer-medievalist errands before my next class.

On the subway, someone sneezes. I check my phone. An email from the dean says that all classes will be held online for the next two weeks, and that I should buy a mask and put it on immediately.

Outside the subway in Midtown, I wait for a bus to cross Central Park. I hope that I'll have enough time after the art exhibit to stop at Bloomingdale's, but the crosstown arteries are clogged by midafternoon traffic. When the M64 bus finally arrives, I'm paralyzed by an allegorical vision.

On the side of the bus, there's a giant advertisement. The ad numbs me with horror. Commuting businessmen angrily push past me as I try to grapple with the ad, which — across the side of the bus — announces in man-sized letters: "AUSCHWITZ."

It takes me a few moments to realize what the poster is promoting. Wrongly, I assumed that the poster is promoting genocide. But, in fact, the poster is promoting genocide *tourism*.

I'm able to hop on the bus and, at some anonymous skyscraper in Midtown, take an elevator up thirty floors and find myself in a dim hallway. The hallway contains an art exhibit by painter Jordan Eagles, curated by HIV/AIDS activist Theodore Kerr.

In the corridor by the elevator bank, there are prints by Eagles on the walls, made with human blood. The blood is HIV+, but it's been treated with medication, so that the virus is undetectable. The prints are reproductions of the world's most expensive painting, Leonardo da Vinci's *Salvator Mundi,* which recently sold for $450 million. The painting is a portrait of Christ with a soft and feminine face and a calming gaze.

Art historians have speculated that Leonardo didn't actually paint *Salvator Mundi,* and of course, the image is a reminder that no one knows what Christ really looked like. In the painting, he's depicted as a white guy with a face not unlike the Mona Lisa.

It's my lunch time. And the blood is lush, velvety, and edible. I want to eat, to consume. I get another email on my phone; my classes at CUNY and Fordham have been cancelled, so I pick up a mask at the pharmacy and get back on the subway to Brooklyn.

But while I'm in the tunnel under the river, there's more news: the president has just announced the pending closure of all international borders, effective Friday. I panic and, with only a notebook and the clothes on my back, I transfer to the A train, and I ride to the end of the line, to JFK airport. I buy a one-way ticket out of New York City, never to return, only logging into the city virtually from Zoom for all eternity.

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