AIDS, Gay Male Sexual Ethics, and Queer Geopolitics

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In its 22 July 1986 gay pride issue, the Raleigh, North Carolina newspaper *Front Page* featured a full page, entirely text-based advertisement for the gay bar CCs. “In the face of the AIDS epidemic,” it read, “gay people have a special, critical responsibility ... to ourselves and to each other. We must face facts. And we must act in sensible, responsible ways.” Responsibility and the facing of facts, however, did not entail an abandonment of sexual activity, as suggested by many mainstream publications. “There are those in society who would like for us to feel bad about ourselves ... and our sexuality,” the ad continued. “We know better. We know ourselves and we know that sexuality is a natural, positive part of our beings” (“Gay Pride” 12; Treichler).

CCs’ sex-positive notion of sexual responsibility was not new. Historian Jennifer Brier has shown that editors and writers of gay periodicals from 1982 through 1984 drew from lessons learned about gay liberation during the late 1960s and early 1970s and discussed healthy and fulfilling ways for gay people to continue having sex in the midst of a burgeoning AIDS epidemic. In reflecting critically on the role of sexual intimacy in gay life, these writers sought to encourage readers to exercise greater concern for the health of themselves and their partners. Disagreements over the practical meaning of this objective were common. Still, Brier wrote, “AIDS provided a moment in which to return to gay liberation, not run away from it” (Brier 14). That moment was fleeting, however. The discovery in 1984 of a virus named the Human Immunodeficiency Virus, or HIV, as the root cause of AIDS by her account effectively ended “debates about the meaning of gay liberation” as discussions “focused on behavior modification alone, such as condom use” (Brier 44).

In the second half of the 1980s, gay writers from major metropolitan areas such as Los Angeles and New York City largely abandoned critical discussions of gay sexual ethics. While underscoring sex as a vital human

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need, they sidestepped the more complicated questions of what sorts of meaning sex should hold in gay life and what types of responsibilities sex should carry. Some areas with smaller, less visible gay communities and lower rates of HIV/AIDS transmission, however, followed a different path. From 1985 to 1988, writers for gay periodicals located in North Carolina continued to contemplate the place of sexual pleasure in gay life as a response to the epidemic. They did so by defining sexual pleasure as an intimate exchange between two or more partners, while still identifying an active, healthy sex life as integral to the spiritual wellbeing and the vitality of the gay community. This brand of sexual ethics associated the physical and psychic welfare of one another as necessarily dependent on the recognition that sex constituted a shared experience of intimacy. In contrast, gay periodicals published and distributed mainly in New York City defined sexual pleasure as an individual act, a form of release that had little to do with the interests of other participants. This contrast shows that although writers from these dissimilar areas urged readers to maintain an active sex life by invoking long-standing gay liberationist tenets, they differed on the practical application of those tenets.

This article explores how local geopolitics informed writers’ discussions of sexual ethics and sexual practices in North Carolina-based gay periodicals. By comparing these local responses with the more well-recognized ones from the gay mecca of New York City, it challenges the national, one-size-fits-all approach that dominates scholarship on the AIDS epidemic in American gay life. AIDS is a national, indeed global, issue. But, as scholar Meredith Raimondo has argued, it is also an epidemic rooted in local conditions and political considerations both related and indirectly related to the AIDS epidemic. That is to say, responses to AIDS took shape in concert with a host of locally-drawn political concerns—some of which involved AIDS; others that did not (Raimondo).

In North Carolina, writers approached the AIDS epidemic while reckoning with the state’s conservative political culture. Despite the then recent influx of young educated professionals and business leaders and its status as the most industrialized of all southern states, North Carolina contained more residents who identified as members of the Ku Klux Klan or the Nazi Party than any other state (Segrest 4). As with twenty-four other states at the time, homosexual sodomy was illegal in North Carolina and deemed a “crime against nature,” a classification that held until state sodomy

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1 This article focuses on gay male responses because responses from lesbian writers introduce a new set of historical problems. For more on lesbian responses, see the section “Lesbian Sexual Politics and the Fight against AIDS” from my dissertation *Imagining a Gay New World: Communities, Identities, and the Ethics of Difference* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2011), 204-18.
laws were deemed unconstitutional by the 2003 U.S. Supreme Court decision *Lawrence v. Texas* ("United States Sodomy Laws").

North Carolina was also home to U.S. Senator Jesse Helms. Helms embodied New Right vitriol towards homosexuality. On 14 October 1987, for instance, he announced on the Senate floor his opposition to federally funded AIDS prevention legislation on the stated basis that it would sanction "unnatural" and "disgusting" homosexual behavior. The Helms Amendment was adopted following that address, effectively prohibiting the distribution of federal funds for AIDS prevention to gay-related service organizations ("Lesbian and Gay" 10; Link). Helms was not alone in his public denouncement of homosexuality. In July 1986 U.S. Representative William Cobey, whose districts included Chapel Hill and Raleigh, co-sponsored a resolution with Helms that overturned a bill passed by the Washington D.C. City Council that prohibited insurance companies from denying coverage to persons who tested positive to the HIV antibodies test. Cobey, who was locked in a tight race with Democratic candidate David Price, expressed his reasons for co-sponsoring the resolution: "I do not feel individuals and private businesses should be forced to live, rent housing to, or conduct business with those who have known sexual preferences to which they have an aversion" ("Helms & Cobey 3). Scholars have overlooked North Carolina and other areas in the South as viable spaces for the cultivation of queer culture and queer politics in large part because of their conservative political climates. This oversight has been compounded by what queer studies scholars Judith Halberstam and Scott Herring have called "a metronormative bias" in lesbian and gay studies. In privileging major urban areas such as Los Angeles, New York City, and San Francisco as centers of American queer life and politics, places like North Carolina get relegated as sites of suspicion, persecution, and secrecy for lesbians and gay men. This presumption has led scholars to preclude the possibility for radical queer politics to reside in non-metropolitan settings (Halberstam 36-37; Herring; Howard). Gay periodical coverage in North Carolina sheds light on this oft-neglected legacy of radical queer political thought.

North Carolina was home to an extensive, burgeoning lesbian and gay press in the 1980s that espoused a political vision founded on non-normative visions of social justice. That growth began in the second half of the 1970s and was made possible by two parallel developments: the expanding geographical reach of gay activism beyond major cities and the creation of a gay wire service, which, like the Associated Press, provided local lesbian and gay periodicals access to gay-related news stories outside of their particular regions (Streitmatter). The first of the major North Carolina-based periodicals to begin publication was *Lambda: The Carolina Gay & Lesbian Association Newsletter*. Established in 1976 by a group of University of North Carolina undergraduate and graduate students, *Lambda* was one of the first and longest running college-oriented gay publications in the country. Three
years later, the Raleigh-based Front Page began circulation. This free bi-weekly newspaper aimed to provide a news and political forum for readers, and was the first publication to target both North Carolina and South Carolina lesbian and gay populations. In 1981, the Triangle Area Lesbian Feminists formed in Durham and began publishing a monthly periodical aptly titled The Newsletter that sought to marry lesbian and feminist concerns in the Raleigh, Durham, Chapel Hill area. In 1986, Charlotte resident Don King began publishing the monthly newspaper Q-Notes. Like the other state prints, Q-Notes was distributed as a free newspaper with the intention of providing news, political information, commentary, and to serve as a bulletin for North Carolina lesbian and gay readers.

The state was also home from 1985 to 1988 to RFD, a reader-written quarterly focused on gay male country living. RFD’s politics and stylistics differed starkly from the urban oriented publications Advocate, Christopher Street, and New York Native. The journal defined itself as decidedly anti-urban, as well as anti-middle class and anti-heteronormative when it began operations in 1973 in Grinnell, Iowa. The magazine retained its rural and radical disposition over a decade later after moving operations to various locales before arriving at the small rural town of Bakersville, North Carolina (Herring).

Packaged as a substitute to mainstream and metropolitan-oriented gay male publications, RFD offered readers feminist-inspired sex-positive messages—messages that rejected the notion that sex entailed “getting off” or that its apex required anal intercourse. Ralph White, James I. Slaff, and John K. Brubaker defined the object of sex as “the mutual enjoyment of pleasurable sensations” that could “be sustained without the pressure of sexual achievement” (Slaff 24-25). While acknowledging the devastating impact of the AIDS epidemic on gay male communities, the three writers saw in the crisis the prospect of a new, more community-oriented gay male sexual ethic—one that unified sexual pleasure with camaraderie and non-competitiveness. Scott Humphries shared this sentiment, describing the AIDS epidemic as “a positive time” for him and other gay men because it “presented [us] with the rare and vital opportunity to re-examine our lifestyle, values, morals as gay men in modern society” (Humphries 45). RFD writers rejected the insinuation that such a re-examination entailed less sexual freedom. Rather, they deemed it a way to make sex more enjoyable, by making it safer and more shared.

In speaking candidly about gay male sexuality and the AIDS epidemic, RFD writers aimed to educate readers so they could make their own informed decisions about how to conduct their sexual lives, no matter how unconventional the sexual practice. Polygamy was one such practice. “It’s OK to be in a couple and it’s OK not to be in a couple,” Christopher Wright told readers; “The point is to free yourself of the expectations of others and to arrive at your own conclusions.” Wright maintained that concerns about
AIDS should not make monogamy, or other culturally dominant notions of sexual safety such as dating and romance, more of an ideal (Wright 46).

*Front Page* columnist John Preston reiterated Wright’s mistrust of monogamy as a reasonable solution to the AIDS epidemic. “A lot of people want to believe that love could conquer AIDS. You have to be very careful when you say monogamy is a defense,” he observed, rejecting the contention that a committed normative relationship could resolve the AIDS crisis. Essayist Darrell Yates-Rist concurred. “We are taught that once you are married, everything will be fine,” he stated in an October 1985 interview with *Front Page*. “You could do anything if it follows the heterosexual model. Love waves its wand and AIDS is gone.” Yates-Rist made clear, however, that his disavowal of marriage and love as solutions to the AIDS epidemic was not a license for unrestricted sexual abandon: “There is a very masculine attitude that sex is all or nothing,” he noted. And, the ideal of love did nothing to challenge the misogyny that straight and gay men carried with them to the bedroom. “It goes back to what John [Preston] was saying about love as panacea,” he indicated; “That seems to apply whether it’s a marriage, or 45 seconds of love on poppers [an inhalant commonly used to increase sexual arousal]” (Preston 11). Having both lived in New York City at various points in their lives, Preston and Yates-Rist each confessed sadness over the passing of a pre-AIDS, more sexually open world. At the same time, Yates-Rist observed that the epidemic compelled him and other gay men to reexamine “our attitudes about sex” and to acknowledge how the linking of unrestricted sexual license with pride was in fact “very heterosexual” (Preston 13).

The comments of *RFD* writers Preston and Yates-Rist prioritized the shared nature of erotic intimacy, rather than the individual pursuit of erotic pleasure. Still, as contributors to the collection of short stories *Hot Living: Erotic Stories About Safe Sex*, they were clearly sex-positive. Like their metropolitan counterparts, they embraced sexual activity, however non-normative, as a liberatory force that enabled individuals to express their erotic desires and ward off homophobia and sexual shame. Unlike their metropolitan counterparts, they emphasized that sex could be free only when erotic enjoyment was shared and kept non-competitive.

Gay male publications from major cities such as New York highlighted the emancipatory potential of gay sexual activity but devoted little attention to the wellbeing of the other partner(s) involved. Rather, attention was placed squarely on the individual: the fulfillment of *his* erotic desires provided the touchstone for what these writers identified as gay liberation. The comments of psychotherapist Neil Kaminisky in an article for *New York Native*, the city’s most commercially successful gay periodical at over 20,000 weekly readers, embodied this sentiment: “The lessons we taught ourselves, about pride in our bodies and our sexuality, about our right to enjoy sexual activity with other consenting adults, with or without love, hold true during this health holocaust as much as they did during the exciting and hopeful
For Kaminsky, the goal was to return to a pre-AIDS era of sexual abandon; that is, to encourage readers to continue having sex, perhaps with a few behavior modifications such as putting on a condom, but not to question their motivations for having sex or even how they treated their sexual partners. For Kaminsky, these considerations signaled a betrayal of core gay liberationist ideals. “We cannot bring back our loved ones,” he stated, “but it’s imperative that we prevent the myriad other losses this epidemic threatens.” With no mention of sex as a shared experience, he concluded, “Our sexuality is in danger. If we lose that, we have lost a paramount component of our humanity” (Kaminsky 21).

Kaminsky, like many *New York Native* contributors, defined sexual freedom in either/or terms: one either possessed or did not possess the freedom to have sex devoid of shame or legal constraint. This rigid dualistic conception of sexual freedom was influenced by Kaminsky and his fellow writers’ experiences living in New York City prior to AIDS. Scholars Peter Braunstein and Samuel Delany have shown that urban decline in the 1970s precipitated an opening of eroticized commercial spaces throughout New York City (Braunstein; Delany). Sanctioned by the rhetoric of gay liberation, these spaces provided more than seemingly limitless opportunities for sex; they provided sites for gay men to fight sexual shame and redeem their sexualities. Hence, although the discotheques and baths that surfaced from these spaces made gay life in the late 1970s appear, in the words of *Christopher Street* columnist Andrew Holleran, “too populous, too glossy, too slick,” their passing was mourned by the author as a tremendous loss. Holleran articulated his reminiscence for the hypersexualized 1970s starkly: “In 1978, we were having sex with one another; in 1988, we were not” (8, 9). Gay male writers from North Carolina expressed no such nostalgia for the commercialized sex-filled Seventies because that sexual past did not exist in the state. The lack of a collective memory about the centrality of sex to North Carolina gay male culture fostered greater adaptability than their New York City counterparts in defining sexual freedom.

That adaptability was influenced also by their strategic alliances with lesbians. North Carolinian gay men and lesbians needed one another to build sustainable communities and institutions, like other areas lacking large urban areas with sizable gay communities. They could not afford to separate from one another due to a lack of financial resources and a sizable volunteer base, which were readily available in metropolitan areas with large gay populations such as New York City (Lekus). North Carolina writers, thus, strategically appealed to both lesbian and gay male readers, even when they targeted one group specifically.

*Q-Notes* editors appeared aware of this need, opting to include minimal sexual content in effort not to alienate readers. The occasional image of a topless man for a local gay bar advertisement was the most risqué content. One notable exception to this pattern was a reoccurring advertisement for “Connections: An Experience of Intimacy for Men” (see Figure 1 below),
which took anywhere from a quarter to a full page of advertising space from 1986 to 1987. The ad, which promoted a series of workshops, featured an image of two boys playing doctor beside an appeal for readers to regain intimacy in their lives. When we were young, it read, “we were so open to each other, so trusting. We gave each other such delight. As we grew up, we closed a little year by year. Sex lost its innocence. Even worse, we learned not to be intimate—physically or emotionally” (“Connections” 5). Connections packaged its workshops as vehicles to promote assertiveness and empowerment in order to tackle personal myths about intimacy. “Actually, we’ve had unconditional love in us all along,” the ad concluded. “We just have to learn to find it again” (5). Connections used much of the same sex-positive language found in Christopher Street, New York Native, and RFD. It implied that intimacy constituted more than a form of release and that it was an existential individual human need: a manifestation of one’s authentic self when one was young and unexposed to pressures imposed by the outside world. Yet, there was one key difference. It used the word “intimacy,” not “sex.” “Intimacy” implies sex, something that Connections alluded to when it referred to the visit to the doctor as “tantalizing,” stated that “sex lost its innocence,” or when it described the meetings as either understanding—attributes less likely to discomfort readers struggling with their sexualities.

While the Connections advertisement was primarily directed at gay male readers, particularly individuals who harbored anxieties about attending a meeting centered on sexual intimacy, I would like to suggest that publishers also had lesbian—and particularly lesbian feminist—readers in mind when printing the image. By presenting sex as an intimate exchange between two or more individuals, the narrative of erotic intimacy revealed in the advertisement eschewed sexual objectification, an issue likely of concern to lesbians but not to gay men. Women’s liberation in the late 1960s and early 1970s was rooted in what cultural historian Beth Bailey calls “the freedom from sexual exploitation,” whereas gay male liberation embraced “a redemptive model of sexual freedom,” the freedom to have sex without legal or social constraints. These ideologies formed in response to the particular modes of oppression each movement’s targeted constituents experienced as the basis of their sexual oppression (Bailey). Q-Notes’ publication the Connections advertisement dovetailed these divergent conceptions of sexual freedom common among its gay male and lesbian readers. In so doing, the newspaper did something common among North Carolina periodicals at this time: it courted a particular segment of the intended audience while strategically presenting images and rhetoric designed not to offend or exclude other readers.
This balancing act sometimes involved efforts to address straight readers as well as lesbians and gay men. Such was the case with *Lambda*, the newsletter for the Carolina Lesbian and Gay Association (CLGA) at the University of North Carolina. After fundraising drives, the organization received most of its financial support from a portion of student fees. Student fees were deducted from each UNC undergraduate and graduate student’s respective financial account and could be adjusted by the democratic vote of student congress. Because student fees were integral to the continued operation of the CLGA and *Lambda* and could be removed any semester through majority vote, writers needed to court straight students in addition to the lesbian and gay ones (“Lambda” 2). Not surprisingly then, *Lambda* Editor Mark Donahue began an October 1987 piece that explained the aims of the
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CGLA with a declaration of inclusivity: “This is an article which I direct to the ‘gay’ as well as the ‘straight’ community.” Other Lambda pieces also underscored the merits of coalition building: “In the society at large,” wrote one columnist, “our but of everybody who accepts, and understands, and extends their affectional selves to everybody” (Donahue 3).

By articulating gay and lesbian concerns in a language designed to attract various possible supporters—gay, straight, or otherwise—Lambda circumvented controversial discussions, especially those discussions involving gay sexual activity. When the topic of sex did appear, the discussion was usually more conservative than other gay publications. In a December 1988 article entitled, “Are There Any Positive Consequences of the AIDS Crisis??” the author, who went by the name of “D.B.,” saw changes in gay male attitudes about sex and love a possible positive consequence of the AIDS epidemic. In the 1960s, D.B. observed, the “gay narcissist” was born, as “[f]or the first time we, along with many other Americans, began to explore ourselves and to learn how to enjoy pleasure without the associated guilt” (D.B. 5). Although D.B. welcomed the undoing of the bonds of sexual repression, s/he feared that the message of sexual freedom in gay liberation thought had been extended too far by placing the interests of the individual and her/his desires ahead of the good of the gay community. The AIDS crisis had the potential to change this pattern by prompting “gay men [to] view sex and love … [as] lasting” (5). D.B. hoped that this change would not have come about due to AIDS; still, s/he felt that the eventual return to “the values of relationships and monogamy,” however derived, was something worth advocating (6).

D.B.’s emphasis on relationships, love, and monogamy was likely a product of how s/he actually felt about those issues. Yet, we should also interpret this emphasis as a balancing between principle, on the one hand, with locally defined political and economic realities, on the other. D.B., like other Lambda writers, was implicitly addressing gay and straight audiences. Further, like all North Carolina gay writers, s/he resided in a state with a conservative political climate and a relatively small gay community. These geopolitical considerations, which had no direct relation to the AIDS epidemic, influenced the unique strategies writers like D.B. adopted when discussing gay sexual practices and ethics. Sometimes, contributors felt compelled to discuss gay sex in coded terms, as in the case of the Connections advertisement in Q-Notes, or when writers adopted conventional ideas of monogamy as solutions to the AIDS epidemic, as was true with Lambda. Other responses leveled radical queer critiques of normative sexuality by rejecting monogamy and love as feasible strategies to fight AIDS, or as ideals for gay people to live their lives. These responses heralded the virtues of an active, healthy sex life free from shame, while oftentimes also promoting a revised notion of intimacy that aimed to account for the welfare of all participants. This community-based sexual ethic was very much alive in the late 1980s, though it is a history not often told because it appeared in a place that scholars tend to overlook. In order to truly understand how AIDS
affected gay lives in the United States, we must acknowledge these oft-neglected local histories and the queer geopolitics they facilitated; not only the more well-established narratives from the prominent gay meccas.
Works Cited


