

CONCLUSION: THE CREATION OF A FAKE, PUBLIC HOMOSEXUALITY

This is my ninth book, and I feel that it is the most radical thing I have ever written. Yet it was made in the most conservative time in which I have ever lived. As a result, I have never in my life been so afraid to say what I know to be true.

This fear is grounded somewhat in the fearfulness I've observed during the whole process of seeking redress for the plagiarism of my novel. I've seen a lot of people back away from saying or acting on what they knew to be true because they were afraid of or identified with the corporate power of the people behind *Rent*. But that kind of thing has usually not ultimately affected me. I remember the wise words of my mentor Maxine Wolfe when she told me that radicals must never stop ourselves because we fear that a greater power would punish us. We must go forward with what we believe to be true and make *them* stop us.

But this time, my fear is located in the knowledge that the central theme of this book is systematically obstructed and denied in our society in this historic moment. Namely, that the dominant culture's power relies on their inability to see how it is constructed, that they rely on *feeling* that their power is a naturally objective state, and that efforts to articulate and analyze how their dominance is enforced are met with annihilation. This method by which our ideas are crushed takes many forms, including ridicule, exclusion, disregard, neglect, scorn, sabotage, poverty, obscurity, marginality.

Therefore, if you are naturally a political person, as I am, envisioning the concrete process of change and articulating that in your artwork is unavoidable. It is organic. Those of us who actually want a better future must take time to think about what it would look like and how to get there. Otherwise we won't get there. This practice doesn't make up the totality of our creative work but neither does it diminish it. In America, politically thoughtful artists are looked down on. "That's not art." Most published fiction in this country is passively supportive of the state. It is the kind of artist/government relationship that Americans only condemn when it happened in places like East Germany. For us, art that exposes uncomfortable truths is diminished for being *didactic*, while art that presents a false veneer of comfort is considered neutral and is promoted. Nowhere is this division more evident than in the commodification of art about AIDS.

We are in a very tender moment when society is making a transition in its understanding of AIDS from lived experience to packaged image, when *Rent* is selected over Diamanda Galás's *Plague Mass*, Derek Jarman's *Blue*—indeed, when *Rent* is selected over a novel with the same characters, events, and dynamics that does not lie about the power differentials between heterosexuals and homosexuals. As we have shown, the existence of homosexuality is no longer being denied. Instead, a fake public homosexuality has been constructed to facilitate a double marketing strategy: selling products to gay consumers that address their emotional need to be accepted while selling a palatable image of homosexuality to heterosexual consumers that meets their need to have their dominance obscured. Rather than elevating the centuries-old underground gay and lesbian culture to the level of mainstream visibility, straight people have invented their own homosexual culture and placed it front and center. As of this writing, Winter, 1998, the components of this fake public homosexuality are rigid.

1. Gay and lesbian celebrities are allowed to emerge as long as they become famous while they are in the closet and then come out.

2. Gay content is permissible if it focuses on romance.

3. Mild homoeroticism in heterosexual paradigms is permissible. Preference is given to "gender-bending," where one or more heterosexual party thinks they have a gay attraction but their *objet d'amour* ends up being straight, but in drag.

3. Homophobia is unmentionable. Nothing that would express anger at straight people or illuminate the pain that straight people have caused, or that would show straight people's complicity or responsibility in relation to homophobia is permitted.

4. Gay people are rarely allowed to be the heroes unless they are tragic heroes, rescued by straight people. Straight audiences must not be expected to universalize to a gay or lesbian protagonist unless they have already built a relationship with that character, thinking they were straight. The most appropriate role for gay or lesbian characters is as sidekicks.

Gay-produced artwork that violates these rules is pushed to the margins. Gay-produced artwork that conforms to these rules can now be elevated to the slightly risqué environs of mainstream culture. The best and most important gay artwork, we're being told repeatedly, is made by straight people and strictly conforms to these restrictions.

The authentic work that gay and lesbian artists have done on AIDS has been replaced in the public discourse by a clean version of crisis. Vehicles like *Rent*, *Philadelphia*, and other AIDS stories promoted by straight people portray a world in which heterosexuals have nothing to account for, to reflect on, or to regret in their behavior toward people with AIDS and gays and lesbians in general. The role of government and pharmaceutical companies is mythologized within the expectations of the general public, and AIDS is comfortable, cathartic, or over.

Rent, of course, is the focus of this inquiry, and it might be helpful to look at *Rent* in terms of the marketing issues discussed thus far. *Rent* functions along the most sophisticated lines of the construction of a fake public homosexuality in a way that works with both gay and straight audiences.

At the center of *Rent* are two white straight men who are roommates. Ordinarily, an AIDS drama would feature two gay white men who live together as lovers, but this unexpected yet important switch immediately puts the audience at ease. It is a paradigm they recognize from other AIDS dramas. For straight audiences, who have worn out their ability to feel sorry but not responsible for gay men with AIDS, the recognition of straight protagonists is a huge relief.

The audience quickly learns that one of the straight white men has AIDS and has a straight Puerto Rican girlfriend who also has AIDS. This is also a point of relief to the white, well-to-do theater-going New York audience. After all, they think of themselves as sophisticated, not prejudiced, and here they have a nice Hispanic girl in the lead role. Oh, she's playing a junkie? Good. That's believable.

Oh, here comes the stretch. There are subplots. One involves a nice-looking black man and his Puerto Rican, homeless, HIV-infected transvestite lover. They kiss on stage while the transvestite is wearing a dress. The audience is reconfirmed in their own sense of how tolerant they are. Gay men wear dresses. They die. How sad. What a relief. Well, that's what happens to gay people, I guess. They're secondary subplots. That's their place, even in the story of AIDS.

The hero, the single white straight man, does not have AIDS. To make him even more sympathetic, he has lost his girlfriend to a black woman. He embodies the gentle straight white man whose sexual relationships and support structures are threatened by the encroachment of uppity people of color and the threat of homosexuality. He is the personification of the Theater of Resentment.

Nonetheless, he still gets to prove his boyish masculinity. The black lesbian is from a rich diplomat's family, and she owns a lot of audio equipment, but she doesn't know how to use any of it. Fortunately, the straight white boy who doesn't have AIDS shows her how. Her girlfriend, Maureen (his old girlfriend), should have stayed with him because she and her lover fight all the time. Bicker, bicker, bicker. They never have fun or help each other or transform each other in the way that the heterosexuals do when they're in love. Furthermore, Maureen keeps flirting with her ex-boyfriend in front of her new girlfriend, so how committed to homosexuality can she really be? Once again the audience is confirmed in their own liberalism. They watched a lesbian couple in a play! Lesbians don't have real love and don't have loyalty and can't fix their own audio equipment. What a relief.

In the end, the audience is reinforced in their own sense of how progressive they are, they are the epitome of tolerance. After all, they watched black people, homeless people, drag queens, and lesbians. In fact, they've been watching characters just like these characters on TV sitcoms, in movies like *Philadelphia*, and in ads for Ikea. And in the end, the presence of all these exotic others proved one hugely important thing, more important even than how tolerant the audience is. In the end, *Rent* proves the supremacy of the white straight people. The people who know how to love. The people who know how to live.

And what about the gay audiences? The audiences who were niche-marketed to through puff piece features in *The Advocate* and *Out*? This part of the picture is one that can be clearly understood if you really know the nuances of what gay people have experienced over the last twenty years. I say this because the gay audience at stake is principally my generation. We are a confused group of queers. In many ways we are the ones who have experienced the most dramatic and traumatic shift in public depiction of homosexuality. We had such profound oppression experiences in childhood

that they can qualify as trauma. We are the last of the dirty-dark-secret generation. We are the last group that came of age in a time in which homosexuality was never mentioned, had no public representation. We were all alone as teenagers; our families punished us severely for our homosexuality. We grew up into an already existing, but fairly underground gay movement. And now we're being told to buy rainbow tumblers. It's something like my grandmother who had to share one pair of shoes in Russia and later watched color TV in New Jersey. You might say it's trading one kind of hell for another, but that's the human condition. My point is that we have experienced changes that are too huge to digest and often too confusing to fully comprehend. So, when we walk into a theater and see two women kissing on stage after we've been humiliated and vilified by our own families for doing the same thing, we're thrilled. But, in the context of contemporary culture, where Roseanne kissed Mariel Hemingway on prime-time TV, that kiss does not have the meaning that we once dreamed it would. It does not mean that we are full human beings whose lives can now be truthfully represented among the selection of lives that make up the American experience. What it really means is that, while in the past we could not be represented because the fact of our existence would mitigate the supremacy of heterosexuality, marketing and the commodification of our experiences has now made it safe for us to be represented and have that fact reinforce the superiority of heterosexuality. Because marketing has changed the codes around homosexuality so dramatically, gay people, even in their thirties, can have perceptions that are out of date with the actual meanings of certain images in today's culture—images that were once loaded but are now benign. They may not be benign to the gay person who longed for those images in the past, but in today's marketplace they mean almost nothing. In other words, marketing has done its job, diminishing the impact of a simple representation of homosexuality, and putting it to work for the heterosexual majority.

It's a state of mind somewhere between post-traumatic stress syndrome and what film theorist Patricia White calls "retrospectatorship," which she describes as "the recognition of the subjective implications of our past . . . our history or biography . . . that determines our current affective experiences." Emotionally, we're living in the past where we each had a profoundly unjust and unresolvable oppression experience, but we're shopping today.

What is clear is that there are two concurrent marketing trends going on at the same time. While fake stories about AIDS that make straight people feel good are the most public narrative, reaping huge financial rewards, Oscars, Pulitzers, and whatnot, real gay people and real people with real AIDS are on an entirely different consumer pipeline, invisible to straight people; where they are subdivided into more and more precise niches while losing and being denied public services and advocates. Their potential advocates, the straight people who make up their families, coworkers, and neighbors, are off to the movies and the theater. There, they are being told over and over again that they have behaved excellently during the AIDS crisis. That in fact, they are the heroes of the AIDS crisis. That gay and lesbian people are not only secondary to them but enormously grateful to them and that they have nothing to account for or even think about or notice.

This is the environment in which we are currently attempting to articulate the actual lived experience of homosexuality and AIDS. The marketplace is filled with pumped-up distortions, while the real truths are always in flux and hard to depict.

This is one of the historical trends that converged on the moment that created the megahit, *Rent*.