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Performing (In) the Grave

Schizophrenic Subjectivities and the NAMES Project AIDS Quilt

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1 The following essay constitutes a theoretical journey through the landscape of the NAMES Project AIDS Quilt, one narrated from the perspective of those who live on to mourn, to remember. To some critics, my approach might at once appear radical or unorthodox since I focus on how Quilt spectators engage with the artifact and are thereby implicated in the history of the epidemic, rather than on how the dead are made to speak from beyond the grave. My intent is not to invalidate the claims made or the conclusions reached by other critics who have written persuasively about how the Quilt facilitates a voice (both individual and collective) for those who have died of AIDS-related illnesses; indeed, such critics have contributed a wealth of significant knowledge to critical understandings of the pedagogical and political functions of the Quilt. My intent, rather, is to respond to a set of as yet unexplored questions about how the ever-evolving landscape of the AIDS epidemic has altered the nature and purpose of Quilt spectatorship.

2When the Quilt was created in 1985, "naming names" was an important strategy for political survival, especially given the institutional apathy that silenced and marginalized all who were infected and/or affected by the epidemic. However, over the past sixteen years, apathy has slowly given way to increased attention by medical and media institutions. No longer is memory and reverence enough. Now, we must ask ourselves how the Quilt can continue to be used to combat the emergent obstacles that have sprung up in the wake of apathy and silence. This is not to suggest that remembrance, mourning, and reverence are not still significant responses to the epidemic; we cannot forget the past, lest we repeat it. But it is to suggest that as we look back, we also must move forward and continue to chart new horizons for how our minds and bodies engage with the Quilt as a social and political space. Throughout this essay, then, my conclusions are at best tentative, offered more as a gesture of hope than as a model for survival. It is my hope that critics can continue to press against social spaces both with caution and determination because those actions matter. We must act with caution because there can be devastating consequences of asserting claims to visibility and location. We must act with determination because there are equally perilous consequences of not doing so.

3Since its meager beginnings, the NAMES Project AIDS Quilt has undergone exponential changes in size, shape, and scope, but critical responses to the Quilt have remained stagnant with most critics attributing to the Quilt a single meaning and purpose: to revere the dead. Cultural critic Peter S. Hawkins, for instance, argues that "the Quilt . . . is most profoundly about the naming of names" (760), while journalist Jerry Gentry suggests that the Quilt bespeaks "a national and international constructive expression of grief" (550), a grief which most powerfully resonates in the loss of individual lives. While "naming names" is a politically important function of the Quilt, critics who read the artifact as only motivated by memory assume that exhibitions of the artifact facilitate a static model of performance. For such critics, the Quilt represents a mass graveyard--both as a place of interment and as a place in which ideological meanings are circumscribed by the fixity and stillness of reverence. (This reading is partly enabled by the fact that each panel measures the size of a human grave.) Not only does this reading universalize the meaning of the Quilt but also it establishes a monolithic viewing position from which to receive that meaning.

4Here, I outline an alternative model of reception which is implicit in the design and display of the Quilt. While this model acknowledges reverence as one potential response to the Quilt, it does not foreclose other ways of reading. Rather than facilitating a grave performance, then, the Quilt enables performances within the grave. These performances are constituted in/through a dynamic exchange between speaker and listener, text and context, and work to produce a range of ideological meanings and subject positions.

5To understand how the Quilt locates its viewers within a particular subject position, it is first necessary to specify the speaker-listener relationship established in displays of the Quilt. This relationship is played out through a series of confessional utterances which, as Michel Foucault explains in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, imply a dialectic relationship between speaker and listener in which subjectivity is predicated on subjection (61-62). The speaker's desire to confess necessitates the presence of a listener, one not wholly passive since his/her presence incites and enables the will to confess. In this way, both speaker and listener are marked as active/passive agents in an exchange characterized by reciprocity and negotiation. Because speakers and listeners simultaneously serve as subject and object of the confession, the exchange cannot be represented as static (active/passive) or unidirectional (sender-message-receiver).

6Since many critics already have carefully delineated the processes through which the Quilt directs the address of the panels and constitutes the dead as subjects, here I want to focus on how spectators are constructed as subjects who bear witness. Critics typically posit viewers of the Quilt as unified, coherent, monolithic subjects; yet Foucault's discussion of the confessional exchange assumes a subject-in-process. For me, this process is most accurately characterized as schizophrenic. My use of schizophrenia is tropic rather than diagnostic, in that the term works figuratively to describe subject formation rather than to identify the nature of psychiatric disturbance. Two characteristics (which are derived from the symptomatology of the psychic disorder schizophrenia) define the schizophrenic spectator: one, the loss of "normal" associations; and two, the presence of "auditory hallucinations."

7The first characteristic of schizophrenic spectators is the loss of "normal" associations. Remi J. Cadoret notes that in schizophrenics, "[t]hought processes appear to lose their normal associations, or usual connecting links, so that the individual is often unable to focus his [sic] thinking upon a particular mental task" (481). For schizophrenics, conventional relational markers (such as chronology, causality, temporality, and spatiality) no longer order cognition; instead, these markers are distorted (if not entirely ineffectual), creating for the schizophrenic a fractured sense of self in/and world. Without these normal associations, the schizophrenic wanders aimlessly (and often in isolation) through a chaotic world in search of structure, meaning, and purpose.

8Temporal associations provide perhaps the most common means of ordering experience. Viewed as a linear progression characterized by movement, change, and renewal, time structures the historical and the everyday by sequencing, demarcating, and hierarchizing events. Within the Quilt, this sense of progression is supplanted by perpetual repetition of the present. Elsley has offered a similar observation, noting that the Quilt operates in a "transitory present" tense, it "exists in a continual state of becoming" (194). In one sense, this perpetual present tense derives from the fact that no two displays of the Quilt are identical. Panels are ordered differently, new names and panels are added, older panels begin to show signs of wear-and-tear. A perpetual present tense also derives from the fact that the Quilt charts the progression of an epidemic that is itself ongoing, incomplete. Thus, the landscape of the Quilt

is re-mapped in light of advances in HIV-treatment, softening/tightening of social mores, and changes in AIDS demographics.

9Another common means of ordering experience is through spatial associations. Location orders the social through architecture, urban planning, and zoning, endowing spaces with a well-defined purpose and layout. Yet the Quilt provides few signals regarding how spectators are intended to navigate its surface. As Weinberg notes, the Quilt is a "great grid" with "no narrative, no start or finish" (37). By describing the Quilt as a "grid," Weinberg implicitly ascribes to the artifact a controlling logic, a unified design--what in quilting parlance is termed a patchwork sampler. This design pattern, however, does not direct the flow of spectators in a single stream of traffic. This is so because, unlike a Drunkard's Path or Double Wedding Band pattern in which the individual panel blocks work together to create a unified design across the surface of the quilt, a patchwork sampler is constituted by a series of single panel blocks, each with a unique design, history, and logic. As a result, patrons' movements are guided by associations and punctuated by pauses, interruptions, and abrupt changes in course. The randomness of engagement is further enabled by the muslin walkways which visually separate the panels, marking each as distinct and disallowing any sense of continuity (narrative, spatial) among them. The routes which visitors of the Quilt traverse thus are transitory and ephemeral, simultaneously charted and erased in the moment of passing by.

10The second characteristic of schizophrenic spectators is the presence of auditory hallucinations. Cadoret defines these hallucinations as "the perception of auditory stimuli, or sounds, where none are externally present The voices . . . may repeat his [sic] thoughts or actions, argue with him [sic], or threaten, scold, or cure him [sic]" (481). Auditory hallucinations can lead the schizophrenic to believe that s/he is under constant surveillance or can cause the schizophrenic to slip further into a self-contained, isolated world of delusion.

11That the Quilt is made up of "a myriad of individual voices" (Elsley 192) is immediately apparent in the number of individuals who have taken part in its construction and display. With each quilt panel, spectators are confronted with multiple voices--the person who has died, the person(s) who made the block, the person(s) who stitched the block to others for a specific display, and so on. Moreover, the Quilt places these "individual voices . . . in the context of community" (Elsley 191). For Quilt spectators, then, memories of a life lived coexist with grief over a life cut short, anger at institutional apathy and systemic homophobia, faith in the import of remembering those who have died, and so on. Each of these voices vie for the spectator's attention, facilitating a gaze that is dynamic, multidirectional, mobile. Because the gaze is not fixed, the Quilt cannot convey a solitary truth claim to its viewers; rather, spectators must immerse themselves within the delusion and confusion of voices, imposing some sense of order on their own viewing experiences.

12Given that persons with AIDS continue to be marginalized within American culture, my use of the schizophrenic spectator to trace the reception dynamic of Quilt exhibits might appear to perpetuate, rather than unsettle, dominant ideological formations. Of course, this is the critical conundrum at the center of all investigations into subject formation: that is, "how to take an oppositional relation to power that is, admittedly, implicated in the very power one opposes" (Butler 17). Despite the potential pitfalls, I nonetheless use the trope of schizophrenia precisely because it recognizes the ways in which Quilt spectators, persons with AIDS, and persons who have died of AIDS-related illnesses are divested of the power and authority to speak even before they begin speaking. Furthermore, because the schizophrenic subject is founded on ever-shifting affinities (in time, across space), the position enables spectators to chart alternative lines of relation among institutional practices, ideological formations, and

individual experiences, thus potentially mobilizing and sustaining a shared political program. It is on these twin goals of pedagogy and polemics that the NAMES Project originally was founded, and it is to these goals that we now must return.

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