IS THE POST- IN POSTGAY THE POST- IN POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER?
ECHOES OF QUEER TRAUMA IN HEIM’S MYSTERIOUS SKIN AND PALAHNIUK’S FIGHT CLUB

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By

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# Table of Contents

1. **At the Break of Gay**
   - And We Don’t Care about the Young Folks  
   - Why Can’t We Just Look the Other Way?  
   - The Hourglass Spills Its Sand  
   - Everyone’s a Little Queer  
   - Things Are Gonna Change—And Not for Better  
   - Hail the Pages Turning

2. **Familiar Tales of the Inconceivable in Mysterious Skin**
   - He’s a Whole New Form of Life  
   - That’s How It Starts  
   - The Only Thing Worse Than Bad Memories Is No Memories at All  
   - Both of Them Side by Side  
   - The Life We Used to Love  
   - Nobody Writes Them Like They Used To

3. **Fight Club: I Am Joe’s Repressed Homosexuality**
   - It’s Probably Just Paranoia  
   - Desperate Times Call for Desperate Measures  
   - Thirty Dialogues Bleed into One  
   - Close Your Eyes Now, Kid  
   - All We’ve Gotta Do Is Be Brave  
   - Who History Doesn’t Teach, It Makes Numb

**Works Cited**
Anxieties have been running high among queer thinkers worried about the ongoing slog of gay identities toward “heteronormativity.” As judges and legislators and activists and ideologues across the nation raise swords over the question of gay marriage, many are wondering whether the costs of mainstream acceptance of homosexuality are too high—or if acceptance, as such, is even desirable. Forced to develop along the margins of society, gay cultures have been free to invent and embrace vibrant new possibilities of being. Judith Halberstam tells us that “strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices” are just some of the new paths flowing from queerness (1). Christopher Castiglia reminds us of the “collectivism, social expansion, and sexual inventiveness” marking gay communities in the time after Stonewall and before AIDS (154). Nowadays, the argument goes, broad changes in attitude have gays looking to monogamy, child-rearing, and other normative pursuits (collectively represented by the exploding movement for gay marriage), and these attitudes are complicit in the closing down of queer possibilities for alternative modes of living, as well as the disavowal of positive ways of looking at the nonnormative gay past. Castiglia and Halberstam make compelling and crucial cases for the protection of queer possibility and queer history. For the purposes of this project, however, I would like to examine implications stemming from the habit of these writers to continually identify one group trotting behind, though not leading, the putsch to abandon all memories of a valuable, anti-normative queer history: the kids.
AND WE DON’T CARE ABOUT THE YOUNG FOLKS

Younger generations of gays and lesbians are portrayed in this worldview as clueless dilettantes, whose inability and unwillingness to see value in nonnormative aspects of the gay past demonstrate a real threat to everything that makes queerness great. Introducing her book *In a Queer Time and Place*, Judith Halberstam argues,

Many young gays and lesbians think of themselves as part of a “post-gender” world and for them the idea of “labeling” becomes a sign of an oppression they have happily cast off in order to move into a pluralistic world of infinite diversity. In other words, it has become commonplace and even clichéd for young urban (white) gays and lesbians to claim that they do not like “labels” and do not want to be “pigeon holed” by identity categories, even as those same identity categories represent the activist labors of previous generations that brought us to the brink of “liberation” in the first place. (19)

Labels like gay and lesbian come to be vessels of history; their rejection constitutes ingratitude, yes, but also a willful strain of amnesia. The abandonment of common identity labels in this context seems, ironically, to be an act of conformity to mainstream thought; as the stickers are left behind so too are their subversive connotations. The kids may think their stance is progressive, but they are actually conceding to the demands of a conservative society in refusing to openly identify with the anti-establishment activism historically signified by “gay.” Halberstam appears to call on that old chestnut: “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” In this case, the doomed repetition would be a return to social conditions in which alternative ways of living are all but impossible or, at best, invisible.

Christopher Castiglia too turns a scolding eye on younger gays for their dismissal of the gay past. The introductory conceit of his essay “Sex Panics, Sex Publics, Sex Memories” is the comparative analysis of two e-mails he received from gay men. The older of the two expresses sadness at being too young to have participated in the vibrant sex cultures that
flourished before AIDS. Discussing his first experiences with public sex in gay spaces, the
man writes, “I felt like I was feeling what ‘they’ must have felt, our older (or dead) gay
brothers . . . some of whom were actually in the room, symbolizing the historical continuity
that so often gets obscured by discourses of ageism” (151). In contrast Castiglia presents a
note from e-mailer number two, who is “probably ten years younger than the first”:

[Gay men entering adulthood in the late 1990s] don’t feel oppressed, we don’t feel
limited, we don’t WANT to feel the need to be a “united front”—rather what we see is
a culture among gay young adults that is far, far more concerned with individual
concerns and causes. This was a trend that began years ago, it would seem. However,
in the 1980s what occurred was a regeneration of activist spirit to “fight AIDS.” Well,
it’s been years now—and the community understands it. . . . It has come to the
forefront of young gay intellectuals that by SEPARATING and SEGREGATING
themselves from the rest of society they are in essence setting the clock back decades.
I feel comfortable in speaking from the perspective of a young gay man who moves in
circles of the relatively cosmopolitan. And as such, allow me to address the major
difficulty for us in terms of activism, as evinced in the 1970s. It evokes images of the
“whore culture.” Who would have thought that “gay college guys” and “monogamy”
would be used in the same sentence without any negation? Activism had always
focused far too much on “embracing” gay culture rather than improving it. . . . Some
say that it is a matter of the abrupt and visible tendencies of the under-25 Queer
culture to be considerably more conservative than the over-25. Rather, I see it as a
subconscious rejection of what we are not comfortable with. . . . People had not been
exposed to information that said “Yes, you can be gay and have civilized, happy,
dating relationships that don’t involve casual sex with whatever guy you find
attractive.” . . . It has finally occurred to Generation Q that [in order] to make any
significant progress in our own lives (call it greedy, if you like) it’s time for gay men
to stop thinking with their dicks (excuse the expression) and start thinking about the
future. The buzzword, so to speak, of Generation Q has been POST GAY. Although
rather amorphous in definition, it is essentially this feeling that “queeny protest” is
out—and getting on with our lives as productive members of society is in. . . . Our
energies are better spent elsewhere on the question of gay prosperity. (151–152)

It would appear Castiglia has his work cut out for him in dismantling the younger man’s
claims. His message oozes with self-satisfaction as he proscribes the behavior of older gays
and calls for remedial action. Even worse than the preciousness of “Generation Q” and “POST
GAY” is his sneering use of “queeny” to describe gay activism, which reads like a reconceived
version of that racist cliché about “uppity negroes” protesting civil oppression. But while
Castiglia is indeed critical of the second writer, he sees no need to state what his readers will surely find self-evident: the younger man is an insufferable fathead. This configuration is downright unsporting. Castiglia gives us an endearing (older) spokesman who corroborates his thesis, followed by an obnoxious (younger) spokesman who holds a contrary opinion yet further corroborates his thesis simply for being obnoxious.

Reluctant to saddle either interlocutor as the spokesperson of his generation, Castiglia explains that he is merely providing the two notes as emblems of “competing attitudes toward memory and collective action (whether sex or protest or both) that lie behind recent sex panics and pro-sex activism” (153). Yet he is careful to present the two writers in terms of their ages, suggesting that older gays (even those who missed the golden 1970s) are temporally nearer to the past and therefore better positioned to understand its worth, appreciate it, and lament its passing. Castiglia goes on to indict gay “neoconservatives”—men like Andrew Sullivan and Michaelangelo Signorile—for propagating assimilative narratives that hold AIDS responsible for pushing homosexuals away from promiscuity (which is pathological), toward monogamy (which is healthy), and finally to mainstream social acceptance (the ne plus ultra of gay liberation). In criticism of these narratives the subtext is always that their proponents, being themselves older gay men, should know better. Savvy older queers may find them exasperating, but the young ones are themselves victims of a misfortune: coming of age at a time when gay neoconservatism has been the only stance legitimized by the dominant media (and many large gay rights organizations). The kids may support the queer appropriation of heteronormativity, but they know not what they do.

My purpose is not to argue that, contrary to the sentiments of many queer intellectuals, young gays would do well to disavow the past and adopt normativity as our happy destiny. It
is telling that neither writer’s commentary about “Generation Q” is very substantial—or even crucial to the theses they help introduce. Instead younger queers are set up as straw men to make a general point about our moment in history. To wit, those who write of young gays having lost touch with the queer past assume their readers have already come to this conclusion on their own. Who needs evidence that post-label, post-political attitudes really are widespread among teenage and twenty-something gays, when it appears true enough and makes for a tasty rebuke? Yet here my argument approaches a conundrum: As a prideful first-wave member of “Generation Y” (or Q, if you prefer), how can I protest the attitude of older queers toward us young’uns while finding myself unable to refute the central claims of their critique? Is my response any more than an exercise in vanity and hurt feelings? After all, what is presented as truism may nevertheless be true. My generation does seem in many ways to inhabit a space of amnesia and apolitical complacency (although that complacency has been arguably coming to an end in recent months as gay activism catches fire again around marriage equality—even as that purpose cannot answer the charges of neoconservatism).

The trouble, I think, is that the picture of younger queers as complacent amnesiacs flattens our experience of history and fails to address the physics behind a manifest break with the past. Why have the gays of Generation Y by and large failed to seek out and connect with queer history and activism? Or, put another way, why have thinkers like Castiglia and Halberstam failed to make their ideas heard by, or feel relevant to, the bulk of younger gay people? The dominance of gay neoconservative narratives is a fair, though partial, answer to both questions. But for a more nuanced investigation of this phenomenon, perhaps hurt feelings offer a good place to start after all. Indeed, if the line of queer history was at some point clipped—its continuity broken and obscured by forgetfulness—there emerges a picture
of time quite similar to that produced by a traumatic event.

**WHY CAN’T WE JUST LOOK THE OTHER WAY?**

In fact the line of queer history has been sundered by a traumatic event: the so-called end of AIDS. Its demise came in 1996 after a new class of antiretroviral therapy, protease inhibitors, became widely available in America. The arrival of the “protease moment” was heralded from all points of the media, including neoconservative Andrew Sullivan in the pages of the *New York Times*. “When Plagues End” breathlessly proclaims that the revolutionary power of the new drugs “is such that a diagnosis of H.I.V. infection is not just different in degree today than, say, five years ago. It is different in kind. It no longer signifies death. It merely signifies illness” (Sullivan 1). But this sea change in symbolization has not been available to everyone. As Douglas Crimp points out, Sullivan “takes his own experience of the development of protease inhibitors not as the experience of a privileged subject—white, male, living in the United States, covered by health insurance—but as a universal subject” (10). Thus while the plague was ending for the elite class, the imaginary of the disease was shifting away from gays to engulf those people for whom the plague was crucially not over. The sickly face of AIDS became increasingly poor, female, heterosexual, non-white, and non-Western.

Mention of the disease these days is more likely to conjure images of sub-Saharan children (thanks in no small part to high-profile fundraising efforts like Bono’s (PRODUCT) RED campaign) than the wan visage of a thirty-something white guy (Tom Hanks, say).

We know that AIDS is not over, not even among well-to-do gay Americans. Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that HIV transmission among men who have sex with men continues to account for a majority of new infections in the U.S.
But the juggernaut chain of signification that gay = AIDS took a fatal hit in 1996. Up to then AIDS activism, which represented a continuation of the gay liberation project that began at Stonewall, was the driving force behind gay self-determination. Only as passion for activism began to wane, and the “cure” arrived for the privileged classes, was the arc of queer history interrupted. The recession of AIDS and activism from gay life is fundamentally linked to the melting of queer history—indeed the two phenomena seem to be caught up in a vicious circle. As AIDS activism ran out of steam, neoconservative narratives about homosexual life were better positioned to saturate the culture unchallenged. Gay men and women entering adulthood at this time, when “queeny protest” was out and “getting on with our lives” was in, were less inclined to join the weakened activist ventures. These grassroots groups continued to shrink, and gay neoconservative thinking became ever more dominant. Queer history, once a phenomenon lived through activism and transmitted directly through cross-generational contact, became mere textbook fodder in the minds of younger gays. The presence of out gays and lesbians in mainstream politics and popular culture was booming, and a growing atmosphere of acceptance allowed more and more gays to come out at younger ages than ever before.

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1 Indeed, this New York Times piece quotes a CDC spokesperson saying that findings from the 2008 study serve “as a powerful reminder that the U.S. epidemic of H.I.V. disease is far from over.”

2 Ann Cvetkovich writes, “AIDS activism represented a significant instance of post-1960s’ movement activism. It built on the models of direct action established by the civil rights, antiwar, women’s, and gay and lesbian movements, thus proving they were still viable, but it was not simply repeating the past since it also created new forms of cultural and media activism, and incorporated a distinctive flair for the visual and performative” (157). Andrew Sullivan’s narrative is quite different, but he does note that because of the health crisis, “[gays] demanded full recognition of their service to their country, and equal treatment under the law for the relationships they had cherished and sustained in the teeth of such terror. AIDS wasn’t the only thing that created this transformation of gay demands, but it was surely linked to them at a deep psychological level” (12).
before. Who needs to seek induction into a remote “gay community” when a young man can be openly gay at home and school, learn about gay sex on the World Wide Web, and have it with his classmates? This is not, of course, a universal narrative. Like Andrew Sullivan’s representative AIDS patient of “When Plagues End,” this formula describes the experience of a privileged subject: the same type of subject for whom AIDS, as a crisis, could be considered “over” (middle-to-upper class, most likely white, etc.).

Lest the equation above appear too pat, I would emphasize that a number of factors crucial to this revolution resist simple placement in a chain of cause and effect. Psychic responses to the AIDS epidemic exist at the core of any cultural shift taking place in the ‘90s. To be sure, protease inhibitors did not hit the scene in 1996 and suddenly make everyone forget about AIDS: ardor to “fight AIDS” had been declining among gay groups for years. In a heartbreaking essay published by the *New York Times* three weeks after he succumbed to the disease, Jeffrey Schmalz laments, “The world is moving on, uncaring, frustrated and bored, leaving by the roadside those of us who are infected and who can’t help but wonder: Whatever happened to AIDS?” (1). That was written in 1993, years before protease inhibitors. By then collectives like ACT UP had already been crippled by death and disagreement, and the mainstream activist movement had taken gays in the military as their banner issue. At 1993’s gay march on Washington, “speaker after speaker ignored” the AIDS crisis (Schmalz 4). This departure was meanwhile playing out against a backdrop of relentless grief. Schmalz quotes Torie Osborn, former executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force: “There is a deep yearning to broaden the agenda beyond AIDS. There’s a natural need for human beings who are in deep grieving to reach for a future beyond their grieving” (4). In other words, it became harder and harder for gay communities to deal with the unyielding pain and
death that was the AIDS epidemic.

Investigating the dematerialization of AIDS from gay public life, Douglas Crimp asserts that “there has been a drastic change, but it is a psychic change, a change in the way we think about AIDS, or rather a change that consists in our inability to continue thinking about AIDS” (17). But what does this departure mean to a generation too young to have had participated in both public sex cultures and AIDS activism? Taking activism and sex as the major conduits through which gay culture and gay history are passed down, younger gays are missing something, but it is not something they had previously possessed. Instead, their experience is defined by entering adulthood after gay culture had passed into a state of trauma.

Cathy Caruth explains that trauma is produced by an event so unexpected (and often so disturbing it could never not be unexpected) that it breaches our psychic defenses and prevents the proper experiencing of the event at the moment it occurs. In its wake, the mind attempts to recapture the lost moment in order to experience it, effectively, for the first time. Thus the horrors of the punctual event are accessible only by memory. Yet as upsetting as it is, the past is gone and can never fully be grasped or understood by the mind. The result is a limbo of knowledge in which the traumatic piece of history is never quite present, nor ever absent (Caruth 4). For Caruth, the study of trauma represents an effort at (re)claiming an obscure past, or, as she puts it, “permitting history to arise where immediate understanding may not” (11). Thus the scope of trauma discourse extends beyond the individual psyche, informing the manner in which catastrophic experience is reconstituted as knowledge and transmitted across and within cultures. “[H]istory, like trauma,” she explains, “is never simply one’s own. . . . history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas” (24). It is the intimate relationship between gay history and trauma that I want to explore.
I am certainly not the first to attempt applying the psychological category of trauma to a widespread experience of culture. Ann Cvetkovich’s work has centered on the potential of traumatic experience to catalyze the formation of queer (lesbian, in particular) communities, or, to reverse that causal chain, the potential of queer communities to produce different ways of looking at trauma that resist simple narratives of pathology and victimization. Like Cvetkovich, I attend to the historical context of trauma, placing catastrophic experiences (like those produced by AIDS) alongside “everyday trauma” (such as the experiences of homophobia and domestic violence) to analyze “trauma as a collective experience that generates collective responses” (Cvetkovich 19). As such, I do not wish to examine trauma as a rampant psychological response to AIDS, one that focuses on the pain of individually affected gay people. The effects of trauma are doubtlessly felt by countless individuals who have buried loved ones, faced personal health crises, suffered hostility and apathy from “mainstream” society, and endured the loss of life-sustaining sex cultures and activism. Indeed, the AIDS crisis encompasses a plethora of interrelated personal traumas. I, however, want to look at the ways in which trauma has affected gay culture and history, how gay identity is constructed, and how culture is (or fails to be) transmitted across generations.

THE HOURGLASS SPILLS ITS SAND

There may be nothing so coherent or monolithic as “gay culture” per se, but the term will suffice as I attempt to parse a major repositioning of the experience of being gay in America. Paradoxically, gay culture, unlike gay people, seems to have passed through the first decade of AIDS without sustaining catastrophic trauma. To be clear, AIDS was a dreadnought of trauma from the beginning: it took gay communities by surprise, conflated sex (the premiere act and symbol of gay liberation) with sickness and death, and unleashed new waves of vitriol
on homosexuals. Yet it appears that “neoconservatives” and “sex-positives” alike agree that the crisis brought out the best in the gay community, giving it “a higher profile and better political organization” (White 226). The gay liberation movement was able to absorb the AIDS crisis as a continuation of its activist project, which codified the gay identity and demanded social justice from institutional powers. Thus the catastrophic blow to gay culture was not AIDS itself, but the receding of the epidemic and all the ruin attending that recession—the disappearance of gay spaces, attrition in communities built around activism, the apotheosis of gay neoconservatism. These shifts taken together can be seen as the traumatic stress that tore the thread of queer history. Before the rift, gay identities were relatively secure; the emergence of discourses about being “postgay” in this era reflects a traumatized destabilization of previous identities. I imagine a sort of gay collective unconsciousness—unable to integrate the blows of trauma sustained in the 1990s, it enters a posttraumatic state from which not only AIDS has vanished but also the idea of AIDS in the gay community, and the idea of a cohesive gay community that is united by a coherent identity and traumatized by a cataclysmic disease. Not only have gay people been lost to AIDS, but also a way of being (gay) in the world. In a typical paradox of trauma, the “before” state here is that of people self-consciously united by all the pain and grief (indeed, the trauma) of AIDS, while the “after,” traumatized, state is that of disconnected people, out of touch with the pain and grief (trauma) of AIDS, at least on a political level. The traumatic event appears to be the disappearance of trauma itself, or rather the sudden and terminal failure of AIDS-related trauma to continue producing community, identity, and a sense of purpose for gay men.

The popular neologism for that shift in gay identities occurring in the 1990s, as demonstrated above by Christopher Castiglia’s younger e-mailer, is “postgay.” And if part of
the postgay condition is amnesia around AIDS and trauma (and perhaps a rejection of AIDS-ness and traumatized-ness), then we may find evidence of posttraumatic echoes from the past in the work of homosexual authors during that time. The writers I will focus on indeed make evident the reverberations of trauma, AIDS, and fractured identities. Novelist Scott Heim cannot be said to occupy a postgay space. He is openly gay and works in the gay idiom, contributing pieces to *The Advocate, Out*, and several gay anthologies, such as *Best American Gay Fiction* and *Boys Like Us: Gay Writers Tell Their Coming Out Stories*. His 1996 novel *Mysterious Skin* is structured around a trauma: the childhood sexual abuse of two boys by their Little League coach. Further, the plotline plays out against the backdrop of the AIDS epidemic. In contrast, Chuck Palahniuk was already the famous author of five novels at the time of his fraught, unpremeditated coming out in 2003. (It seems that Palahniuk outed himself after being wrongly led to believe a reporter was going to do it for him—but more on that later.) The first book he published, 1996’s *Fight Club*, deals with the effects of an apparent psychological trauma and contains the spectral presence of AIDS.

Whether or not their works can be considered “postgay,” neither one of these writers is a member of the younger generation entering adulthood in the late ‘90s. Rather, Chuck Palahniuk (b. 1962), along with cultural critics Christopher Castiglia (b. 1960) and Judith Halberstam (b. 1961), represent the youngest of the baby boomer generation, recognized by the U.S. Census as Americans born 1946–1964. Scott Heim (b. 1966) is just out of this range, but nearly the same in age to the others. If their books are postgay, it is manifest through their content and the notion that they were arguably written for and marketed to the generation that was coming of age when they were first published. To answer the question of whether these writers inhabit the postgay, and what postgay represents to literature and popular identities, we
must explore the neologism’s provenance and seek a meaningful definition.

**EVERYONE’S A LITTLE QUEER**

Naming has been a touchy subject for Americans of “alternative lifestyles” in recent decades. Like the terms gay and queer, differing groups have invoked “postgay” to different ends since it emerged. The word’s definition, as articulated in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is judicious enough: “post-gay adj. of or designating a period in which homosexuality is no longer a significant social issue or a determining factor of cultural identity” (“Post-, Prefix”).

From the beginning, postgay has been concerned with literature, and its first recorded usage comes out of a 1980 issue of *The Advocate*:

> It’s time to . . . recognize that a new age is upon us—an age of “post-gay” literature. What is “post-gay” literature? . . . It is not the record of an isolated and powerless group. . . . Like the new feminist writing, post-gay literature could use the fact of gayness as a take-off point for explorations not directly related to homosexuality. (“Post-, Prefix”)

Notice the term begins to lose its coherence in context. The writer above asks us to imagine the definitive sociocultural shift beyond strict gayness, but we are left to wonder: What is the difference between postgay and not gay? Must the creator of postgay fiction be, in fact, gay? Does the literature need to portray characters that have gay romances, embedded in a world where homosexuality is simply not that big of a deal? Also, does “gay” refer necessarily to an “isolated and powerless group”?

That quotation echoes to the present from a different America, before AIDS, before Ellen, before *Lawrence v. Texas* and any state-recognized gay marriage. But the same sense of confusion about the role of sexuality in our lives operates today, driving commentators to dust off the postgay label. In 1994, novelist Edmund White began to articulate the gay-postgay divide as a generational break, one that signifies an aesthetic departure. Among openly gay
fiction writers, he argues, younger cohorts no longer feel compelled to include explicitly gay subject matter in their work. “I call it sort of post-gay. People aren’t in the closet, they’re frank about their sexuality, but they don’t feel limited to gay subject matter. They feel they can write about anything” (qtd. in “Post-gay”). Postgay seems here to represent the telos of gay liberation—after all our activist goals have been achieved, the only thing left to be liberated from is gayness itself. White expounds on this thought eight years later, in his afterword to the 20th-anniversary edition of his novel *A Boy’s Own Story*: “Today the whole category of gay and lesbian fiction seems dated and about to disappear. . . . Gay novelists are bridging into other domains. . . . Michael Cunningham has become the best known postgay writer, winning the Pulitzer Prize for *The Hours*, . . . [which] mixes a gay man and his lesbian friend in with a larger, heterosexual cast” (227). Though White prefers to assign the postgay moniker to the writer and not necessarily his work, *The Hours* is an odd choice to highlight here. Taking as its base *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf, an author long since inducted into the gay canon, *The Hours* features more queer characters than straights. In terms of the “heterosexual cast,” could White be referring to Laura Brown, the despondent housewife who abandons her husband and young children after sharing an erotically charged embrace with a neighbor lady, a moment meant to resemble the youthful same-sex kiss that haunts Clarissa Dalloway in Woolf’s text? Surely the world of *The Hours*, whose major plot thrust involves a celebrated gay poet succumbing to AIDS-related dementia, is not a place where homosexuality is no longer a significant social issue.

On the contrary, Cunningham’s book even includes an episode addressing the type of queer generational conflict White sees becoming irrelevant. Clarissa Vaughan is flustered when her daughter brings to the family home a stridently anti-normative queer activist, Mary
—“Mary the stern and rigorous, Mary the righteous, shaved head beginning to show dark stubble, wearing rat-colored slacks, breasts dangling (she must be past forty) under a ragged white tank top. Here is her heavy tread; here are her knowing, suspicious eyes” (158). There is certainly no love lost between Mary and Clarissa. Focalization shifts and the reader is served a piece of the younger lesbian’s mind: “Fool,” Mary thinks. “Anything’s better than queers of the old school, dressed to pass, bourgeois to the bone, living like husband and wife. Better to be a frank and open asshole . . . than a well-dressed dyke with a respectable job” (160).

Although both Mary and Clarissa are ostensibly middle-aged women, their mutual silent distrust indicates a generational split similar to the one discussed above, only in this case, the complacent, conformist generation is the older one. In Clarissa’s final, nonverbal excoriation, she condemns Mary’s worldview to the dustbin of history: “You’re just as bad as most men, just that aggressive, just that self-aggrandizing, and your hour will come and go” (161). It may be that Michael Cunningham welcomes a less radical, more “mainstream” younger generation of gays and lesbians. His portrayal of Mary the Queer is decidedly ungenerous—for all her sneering bluster, Mary is at last in thrall to a teenage girl who will never love her in return. But *The Hours* takes seriously the question of what it means to be a homosexual in our time and culture, and cannot as such be called postgay by Edmund White’s own story.

Ironically, Judith Halberstam (whom we might have pegged as more Mary Krull than Clarissa Vaughan) celebrates *The Hours* for demonstrating a specifically “queer rendering of time and space,” seeing Clarissa’s decision to settle down with another woman as a rejection of the normative march toward (heterosexual) marriage (2–3). She lauds the novel’s ability, through its careful deployment of three separate but inter-referential narratives, to make contact with the past and create “temporal havoc in the key of desire” (3). In this way,
Cunningham allows Clarissa Vaughan to inhabit the vibrant queer space that was unavailable to Clarissa Dalloway in her time (and, perhaps, Virginia Woolf in hers). Still, there is some temporal havoc in the book that is less life affirming than the kind Judith Halberstam points out. Richard, struggling with the final stages of his AIDS battle, remarks to Clarissa, “I seem to keep thinking things have already happened. When you asked if I remembered about the party and the ceremony, I thought you meant, did I remember having gone to them. And I did remember. I seem to have fallen out of time” (62). Clarissa later explains, “he was a little too far gone for the protease inhibitors to help him the way they’re helping some people” (131). At last, Richard is an anachronism: an affluent gay white man dying of AIDS after the time that affluent gay white men died of AIDS. His personal trauma, losing touch with rational human time and with his past, is representative of a collective trauma—the loss of AIDS itself as a source of meaning and, with it, the queer cultural past. Cunningham may be commenting on the passage of culture into postgay space-time (perhaps positively, as Richard’s abrupt death frees Clarissa to move on and focus on her own neglected needs), but can the text itself be called postgay? The question resists a simple yes or no.

**THINGS ARE GONNA CHANGE—AND NOT FOR BETTER**

The inscrutability of postgay as a literary category is reflected, as in a cracked mirror, by the term’s usage as a stamp of cultural identity. One facet is indeed the blithely progressive stance that Castiglia and Halberstam fear. Take for example this entry from Urban Dictionary, a website that collects emerging neologisms. A user with the handle “Hater101” explains postgay thus:

The notion that homosexuals should be able to define their identities by something other than sexual preference.
Post-gay types ought to be comfortable in gay ghetto situations, lest they suffer some sort of internalized homophobia, while realizing that many ghettoized gays are tasteless losers [sic].

Post-gays are out of the closet and care about gay rights and gay issues. Their stance on identity and culture is a reaction against the fetishization of gay stereotypes by some self-proclaimed liberal types (such as faghags) as well as cultural separatists [sic] (such as queers). They tend to refer to themselves as ‘gay’ and only invoke the word ‘post-gay’ in the presence [sic] of the tasteless losers who have co-opted the falsehood of a monolithic gay culture.

Post-gays also realize the history of the struggle for gay equality and know they their [sic] attitude can only exist in environments [sic] where gays are already integrated and accepted. It is only within these environments [sic] that they critique others.

*Get rid of your affectations, you live in fucking NYC (or SF or Seattle or Paris or Berlin), and there are like 5 neighborhoods where gay couples regularly hold-hands, unless your only friends are stock brokers it’s no big deal here, it’s all about post-gay now!*  

The submission initially brings to mind Christopher Castiglia’s younger e-mailer. The writer channels his frustration into moral superiority, taking potshots at perceived nemeses. Although our first impulse may be to dismiss his argument outright (the typos and spelling errors do little to help his cause), Hater101’s definition says more than he may have intended. He wants to activate “postgay” as an intervention. Those homosexuals who seem to buy into “cultural separatism” or embody gay stereotypes, he implies, are simply attuned to a world that no longer exists. Postgay, he argues, can be deployed as a blunt tool to knock some sense into those ghetto-minded gays living in the past. But in his zeal to move on, Hater101 introduces a twilight nether-era in which “the struggle for gay equality” is mostly over, yet we remain beset by an undead “gay” identity. How can we leave the past behind when obsolete ideas like queer anti-assimilationism and gay-ghetto isolationism are still prevalent? In opposition, the postgay figures as negative space defined by a no-longer-present, not-yet-departed condition.

Talk of “postgay” exploded in the time just after the protease moment. The summer of
1998 saw the “first major American symposium” on the subject, which was sponsored by *Out* magazine and Manhattan’s New School for Social Research. *Out*’s helm had just changed hands, and its new editor in chief, James Collard, used the term as his intellectual platform for reinventing the magazine. A *New York Times* column on Collard explains that under a postgay philosophy, “a homosexual’s identity is not defined by sexuality alone. It champions the idea that gay culture and mainstream culture cross-pollinate. The July [1998] issue of *Out* has an article about Idlewild, a downtown bar with a clientele more heterosexual than gay” (Colman). Collard’s tenure at the gay rag was to be short-lived, however; only six months after taking the reins, he had returned to London for an “extended leave of absence,” never to return (Drum).

He later argued that gay life in the U.S. had failed to mature as it did in other places:

> I began to feel that American gay culture, which for so long led the rest of the world, was stuck in some endless, rather tearful coming-out party. Britain, meanwhile, has moved on. Writers like Paul Burston and Mark Simpson began sophisticated and provocative “post-gay” and “anti-gay” critiques that chipped away at that great American shibboleth, the gay identity. When I made the mistake of voicing some of these opinions at New York’s New School, I got a bollocking from gay activists, who feel there isn’t the room for that kind of fancy footwork. (Collard)

If “gay” is indeed a shibboleth, Americans were not ready to exchange it for a new one in 1998. By winter many were eager to shrug off the concept of postgay as another fad whose time had gone. In “Ex-Gay. Too Gay. Postgay. What Happened to Gay?” Michelangelo Signorile concludes that if “gay just was not the thing to be” throughout most of 1998, all that changed following the gay bashing murder of Matthew Shepard in October. Outpourings of grief and anger among gay communities made postgay appear, according to Signorile, as nothing more than a silly, boom-time affectation of spoiled urbanites. He adds his voice to the “bollocking” of James Collard, accusing the Brit of using postgay “to claim intellectual underpinning for what was nothing but political complacency” and “exploit[ing] the new
apolitical mood that had people rejecting gay identity and turning away from politics.” Perhaps it should be noted, in the interest of full disclosure, that Collard and Signorile (who was an *Out* columnist at the time Collard took over) indulged in a public feud over the direction of the magazine; hostilities fulminated at a crowded Manhattan restaurant when Signorile announced he was quitting and tossed water in the face of his editor in chief. “He told me I should tone down the column and said it had lost passion,” Signorile explained, “which is ludicrous” (Wockner).

Dramatic confrontations notwithstanding, Signorile does offer some insight into the historical moment. “One reason we had the luxury this year to engage in spirited if sometimes divisive debates to discuss things as seemingly silly as whether we were too gay was because we had lost a common focus. Death and disease, quite thankfully were no longer drawing many of us together.” Indeed, the writer corroborates his claim with a stunning fact: August 1998 saw the first week in 17 years that San Francisco’s *Bay Area Reporter* did not have any obituaries to report. The protease moment had been fully realized. But if the precipitous drop in AIDS deaths allowed postgay to “slither onto the scene,” a familiar cohort welcomed it with open hearts. “[For] particularly younger people who had not experienced the horrors of the late-'80s AIDS epidemic, absence of death was enough to have them believe that ‘the AIDS crisis is over.’ . . . It appeared that AIDS itself, having been around for 18 years, was also now too gay.” Like other critics, Signorile sees a phenomenon of gay cultural amnesia reaching its zenith during the protease moment, even if its emergence predated the new therapies. And it is no coincidence that this phenomenon occurred just as the first wave of so-called Generation Y was reaching adulthood.
In his influential essay, “Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?”—from which I glean the title of this project—Kwame Appiah describes how difficult it is to come up with a coherent, unifying definition of “postmodern.” For all the different ways it is deployed, in academic and popular writing, in reference to music, art, architecture, whatever, there are specific and sometimes contradictory meanings. Ultimately, Appiah concludes, “In each of these domains there is an antecedent practice that laid claim to a certain exclusivity of insight, and in each of them ‘postmodernism’ is a name for the rejection of that claim to exclusivity, a rejection that is almost always more playful, though not necessarily less serious, than the practice it aims to replace” (341–42). As such he sees a variety of postmodernisms, finding it necessary to “leave open the question of how their theories of contemporary social, cultural, and economic life relate to the actual practices that constitute that life—to leave open, then, the relations between postmodernism and postmodernity” (342). Postgay likewise represents an uncertain relation between ideology and temporality. As an ideological term, postgay discerns a break with the past and insists that old cultural practices are simply no longer appropriate to contemporary life. It rejects the presumed exclusivity of insight concerning what a gay man desires, what he identifies with, and how he chooses to live. Sometimes this takes the form of demonizing the past, as in neoconservative narratives, or wrist-slapping those gays who identify with expressions of culture deemed to be outmoded. But simply as a way to think about time, postgay may achieve a more sophisticated critical potential.

In an elegant piece for *Salon*, Thomas Rogers asks, “Where Have All the Drag Queens Gone?” and seeks to articulate the gay generational shift I have suggested:
As a child of the ‘90s, I was taught by popular culture to expect several things from my future life as a gay man: shirtless dancing in large nightclubs, a disconcerting number of flamboyantly patterned shirts and, of course, drag queens. . . . But something funny happened on my way to the gay ghetto: The drag queen disappeared not only from mainstream popular culture, but also, to a large extent, from the gay culture of my generation. Most young gay men I know are far more likely to head to a gay-friendly straight bar than take in a drag show. . . . (1)

Here the striking figure of the drag queen stands in metonymically for other elements that seemed essential to gay life before everything changed in the ‘90s. Rogers goes on to ask, “Without the trauma of oppression, how will future generations of gay men define themselves? Through promiscuity? Party drugs? A flair for dinner parties?” (1). The move away from things like drag and promiscuity—“punk rock reactions” (in Ru Paul’s parlance) to homophobia, sexual repression, and a hypermasculine culture (Rogers 1)—does not constitute a conscious rejection of mainstream gay culture as much as the recognition that “something funny happened.” This is how I want to use the term postgay, as signifying a time after something happened. What exactly may be obscured by trauma. As Rogers suggests, gay people coming of age today may not face the same deep trauma of generations past, but we still approach a culture that is in many ways traumatized. With careful attention to symptoms of trauma surrounding the postgay (ideological narratives among them), the term can achieve critical potential. Perhaps if we attempt to “cure” postgay of its posttraumatic stress disorder this way, we may begin to reclaim the “something funny” in history that brought it about in the first place.

In the remaining chapters, I examine two novels by gay authors that were produced during the critical time of transition I posited above. Each book, in its own way, evinces a complicated engagement with queer trauma and bears a strange, obscure connection to AIDS. Chapter 2 explores Scott Heim’s novel Mysterious Skin, the chronicle of two young men
struggling to come to terms with the sexual abuse they both suffered as children. Asking the question of what it means for an openly gay author to take a somewhat oblique look at AIDS in the mid-1990s, I attempt to elucidate the strange intersections between various queer traumas—the trauma of (homosexual) child abuse, trauma inflicted by (and resulting from) AIDS, and “everyday” traumas like homophobia. I suggest the importance of the author’s traumatic personal history on his work and show that his autobiographical narrative shares much with the traumatic narratives he creates for his two protagonists in *Mysterious Skin*. Different ways of glancing into the past illustrate the difficulty in creating a meta-narrative of history where trauma (and the postgay) is concerned. Chapter 3 asserts the preeminence of masculinity in discussions of the postgay, wondering how a gay writer manages the business of remaining in the closet (along with his work) in contemporary times. I employ James Creech’s concept of the wink in a novel way, bringing it from the 19th century into the 1990s to look for traces of homoerotic desire in Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club*. In an age marked by the traumas of AIDS and homophobia, I suggest that Palahniuk demonstrates an inadvertent wink (a “nictitant twitch,” I term it) in reference to traumatically queer subjects like the epidemic. Although Palahniuk avoids the words “AIDS” and “HIV,” his narrative reveals a haunted connection to the disease and what it means to the stigma of homosexuality.
In order to locate the boundaries between gay and postgay literature, the fiction of AIDS and fiction after AIDS, it becomes necessary to wrestle with the canon of gay literature, or specifically, the ways the gay canon is constructed. As I discussed in chapter 1, the emergence of “postgay” as a way of writing assumes a somewhat stable definition of gay literature before it. Many writers before me have interrogated the category of gay lit, often wondering how we, as gays, can absorb the work of long-dead men and women into the gay canon while the writers themselves could have no conception of gay identity per se. The subject continues to be hotly and publicly argued, as the ever-prickly Larry Kramer demonstrates in a recent piece for The Huffington Post. Apoplectic that the topic is even up for debate, Kramer spits, “This ludicrous state of affairs prohibits making statements such as: ‘they did then what we do now,’ without the wrath of queer theorists raining down insults of an uncommonly vitriolic nature. . . . You can’t prove it! say they. It’s been here all along since the beginning of history, say many others of us” (Kramer). Without discussing the topic of literary attribution exactly, it is doubtful Kramer would have a kind word for anyone willing to question the status of, say, Whitman or Proust as gay writers. We may also wonder whether Kramer sees the presumed timelessness of gay sex and desire as proof positive that a gay cultural tradition too exists outside of history. At any rate, Kramer’s conflating of sex and

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3 Gregory Woods attributes to writer Alan Sinfield the line “gay men seem doomed to wrestle with the canons” (11). Woods provides a generous bibliography of textual critics on “canonical” writers; among those with a more theoretical bent are Leo Bersani (Homos, 1995), Jonathan Dollimore (Sexual Dissidence, 1991), and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Epistemology of the Closet, 1991) (392).
identity as he looks into the past betrays a common and problematic attitude toward the present: that now, years since homosexual desire sashayed out of the proverbial closet, the perimeters of gay identity and gay culture are clear and stable. It might seem that because I am not concerned with writers of the past, I would have no need to resort to any “gobbledygook theorizing,” in Kramer’s parlance, to parse the limits of gay literature. But perhaps I do.

**He’s a Whole New Form of Life**

Gregory Woods writes, “It is easy to tell where gay literature begins—in openly gay authors’ writing explicitly about the experience of being gay—but where does it end?” (12). In contemporary culture, long after homosexuality was codified by medical science and reclaimed as a healthy identity by the so-called ill, what does an author who “does what we do now” have to reject in order to *not* write gay lit? The question will be particularly vexing in the next chapter, which discusses novelist Chuck Palahniuk. That writer has admitted his long-term homosexual relationship, yet demonstrates a fraught attitude toward the gay identity and being publicly gay. He certainly does not seem very concerned with documenting the gay experience or animating gay characters. For now, however, I will start where Woods suggests and look at Scott Heim. The writer of three novels, as well as poetry, short fiction, and essays, Heim is easily recognized as a gay author. His work features gay themes and characters; he has contributed pieces to such markedly gay publications as *The Advocate* and *Out*; and he has granted interviews to scores of other gay newspapers and magazines, which make a point to review his writing. Two critical snippets on the back cover of his novel *Mysterious Skin* come from *Lambda Book Report* and the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Furthermore, Heim has written explicitly about his own experience of being gay, coming out of the closet, and having sex with men. He is marked as a gay author not only by the gay media but also by his willingness
to engage the gay media and discuss his sexuality freely.

But before we wedge Scott Heim’s work firmly into the gay lit category, let us take a moment to consider whether it might not also be postgay. As previously discussed, postgay is a difficult term to parse. Heim’s novel *Mysterious Skin* (1995) features a couple of explicitly gay characters and some gay experience, but it also depicts straight characters and their experiences. The narrative unfurls in a series of short first-person chapters, rotating among its two clear protagonists, Brian Lackey and Neil McCormick, their friends Eric and Wendy, and Brian’s sister Deborah. Placing at its foundation Brian and Neil’s childhood sexual abuse by their Little League coach, *Mysterious Skin* illustrates the echoes of trauma with breathtaking power, demonstrating various ways its effects are felt by the abused as well as those who live in the vicinity of the abused. The two self-proclaimed queer characters are Neil and his friend Eric; Wendy and Deborah are straight, and Brian, although somewhat coded as gay, seems to exist in a nonsexual space, as if the abusive sex he suffered as an eight-year-old pushed him away from any conceivable realm of sexuality. Because the novel makes sure to illustrate Neil’s emerging homosexuality and Brian’s acute lack of boyhood masculinity as existing before the coach intervenes in their sexual development, we are forced to ask whether their experiences of pedophilic abuse constitute a specifically gay form of trauma.

The question of the book’s gayness (or postgayness) is further muddied by assumptions about what a gay author should write about during the mid-’90s. Published in 1995, *Mysterious Skin* arrived just before the protease moment began to finally foreclose the gay = AIDS chain of signification. Yet, as noted in chapter 1, gay activism around the epidemic was already in sharp decline. “In a very real sense, all writing today is AIDS writing in that it must consciously choose how to respond to the epidemic, whether by direct
involvement or evasion” (Poirier 7). So claims editor Suzanne Poirier in her introduction to the 1993 collection *Writing AIDS: Gay Literature, Language, and Analysis*. Her statement is arguably true of the time it was written—especially if you replace “all writing” with “gay (male) writing”—yet its validity has surely declined over the years, and fast. The receding of AIDS from gay culture that occurred in the 1990s has never been reversed, and even the post-protease activist alarm call that “the AIDS crisis is not over” seems to have fallen silent years ago. *Mysterious Skin* presents a world thoroughly marked by AIDS, yet its engagement with the disease is less than direct. In his chapter of *A History of Gay Literature: The Male Tradition* on the epidemic, Gregory Woods draws a line connecting a long history of associations of gay men as tragic, doomed figures to its latest manifestation in the signification of AIDS. Providing many examples of the AIDS narrative and commemorative poetry in gay literature, it is unclear whether Woods believes, as Suzanne Poirier seems to, that the epidemic denotes a period when gay lit became synonymous with AIDS lit. But he does respond to her statement by asking for a softening in the political demands of AIDS on “all writing.” He suggests that “there may well be ways of responding to AIDS which cannot strictly be characterized as ‘direct involvement.’ There is, I think, a literature of indirection which is not evasive” (Woods 368). The fading away of the AIDS crisis was not a punctual event but a process with many overlapping stages. Perhaps because *Mysterious Skin* was written earlier than the other two novels I will address (and perhaps because Scott Heim is an openly gay man), it has access to a more direct perspective on the epidemic. AIDS is a fact of life in the novel, one manifest in gay characters’ dread of the disease and in the troubling sight of an AIDS-plagued body (unlike *Fight Club*, in which the disease appears largely stripped of its catastrophic power). Though its engagement with AIDS is limited, the book does take on a
direct and critical engagement with trauma itself and thus raises questions of how AIDS-related trauma circulates among other traumas and why this era may be a particularly traumatic one in general.

**That’s How It Starts**

“In some ways, I write about the things I’ve always been shocked by, or embarrassed by, things from my past or things that have happened to other people that obsess me and then become exaggerated or warped into my fiction. . . . I think writing is a way of exorcising demons, or confronting things that embarrass or disturb or rattle me” (Gambone 302). So says Scott Heim in an anthology of conversations with gay fiction writers. Autobiography seems to be the logical starting point for many queer authors working with the trauma of the abused child. A name that consistently comes up in related discussions is Dorothy Allison and her novel *Bastard out of Carolina*. The “semiautobiographical” work attends to incest and sexual abuse, personal traumas of which Allison has been fearlessly candid about experiencing in her own life. Ann Cvetkovich quotes Allison discussing her motivation: “What is the story I will not tell? The story I do not tell is the only one that is a lie. It is the story of the life I do not lead, without complication, mystery, courage, or the transfiguration of the flesh” (35). Scott Heim likewise “refuses . . . to erase the rough edges from [his] experience” or “present the [sexual abuse] survivor as innocent victim” (Cvetkovich 35, 13). Unlike Allison, Heim has not professed to having experienced any childhood abuse similar to the kind Neil and Brian suffer at the hands of their baseball coach in *Mysterious Skin*. Yet Heim is careful to demonstrate that there are other, subtler forms of trauma common to queer people (such as homophobia) that may be felt in the same circles as more individually catastrophic abuse.

There is one personal account of Heim’s that seems to demand a viewing place
alongside *Mysterious Skin*. In “Ant,” collected in *Boys Like Us: Gay Writers Tell Their Coming out Stories*, Scott Heim writes about coming to terms with his homosexuality in small-town Kansas. Graduating from high school, Heim abandons Little River for the relatively cosmopolitan Lawrence to attend Kansas University and pursue his first experiences with sex. Lawrence, he explains, lacked a gay bar, but “any in-the-know student” could find lusty men at the campus cruising area, a wooded pond by the university bell tower. Even before his first encounter, Heim was “horrified by the thought of anonymous sex. My beliefs were nearly as absurd as my mother’s [pathological] explanations of homosexuality, years before. If I left my car, surely I’d be bludgeoned or knifed. A stranger’s tongue in my mouth would no doubt result in disease” (279). Indeed, Heim’s overwhelming sense of foreboding proves a foreshadowing of events to come. After overcoming his hesitance, Heim goes down to the cruising grounds and picks up a man who leads him into a cramped tool closet. The initial “half excitement, half terror” of primary sexual experience soon gives way to what one might call a rape narrative, delivered in Heim’s characteristically graphic style:

> While he fucked my face, I felt rain spattering me, baptismal. Then he began smacking me. He kept missing target, his hand striking my cheek sometimes, my ear or neck others, his blows unpredictable in the darkness. After the initial seven or eight, his hand made a fist.
> 
> Weary of that, he pushed me on my side. My head collided with a bag of some powdery substance which smelled like the chalk I used to line batter’s boxes with before games, back when I was a twelve-year-old shortstop. It spilled and stuck to my wet hair. The guy fumbled with my belt and zipper. I knew what he was doing, but didn’t fight him. He lifted me slightly, searching for his bull’s-eye. When he found it, he fucked and fucked me, my head pounding against the bag of powdery stuff, little puffs making baby’s breaths on my skin. After five or ten or fifteen minutes, he pulled out, came, dropped my now-unnecessary ass.
> 
> The guy wrenched open the groundskeeper’s room door. Light and rain sliced in. . . . He was sprinting into the rain, back to his car or house or wherever. . . . (280–81)

Curiously, Heim does not reflect negatively on the event. Abandoned naked in the shed, he pulls up his pants and drives back to his quiet apartment. “But I didn’t cry,” he insists. “I
remember thinking a little about my ‘experience,’ but perhaps not as much as I imagined someone would think after what had happened” (281). Perhaps not, but he did take care to clean up the event while memorializing it in his journal: “[B]y the time I’d jotted down that horror, it was a mere sketch, a ‘tame’ version of what really happened. . . . ‘Dear Diary: Tonight I went to the Campanile. This guy approached. We fucked in this gardening shed thingamajig beside the parking garage’” (281). What I find most fascinating about “Ant” is that Heim refuses to offer a reassessment of the event from the present. He does call it a “horror” and acknowledges there were “messy details,” but he only reflects on the way he did not reflect after it first occurred. Content to allow his harrowing account speak for itself, nowhere does Heim concede that what happened to him was rape, or that it created psychological trauma of any lasting effect. Perhaps he colludes in the (often misogynistic) cliché that he was “asking for it”: he went to the Campanile looking for sex; he failed to object or fight back when the encounter turned violent. Or perhaps to attempt a psychoanalytical analysis of Heim’s ambivalence to the event is to miss the point. Like Dorothy Allison, he refuses to cast the survivor of sexual abuse, in this case himself, as an innocent victim. Instead, the horror of “Ant” gives way to a narrative of familial coming together—Heim’s mother finds the diary, discovers her son is gay, and the two resolve never again to hold secrets from one another, as “the sun blossomed toward the horizon, and the room grew amazingly bright” (282). Then again, perhaps Heim did experience a resounding trauma that day in the tool shed, because in Mysterious Skin, Neil is raped in a scene that bears a shocking similarity to the one above, and the fictional character’s victimhood is made readily apparent.

Neil McCormick is in an abusive sexual relationship—or as he might call it himself, a “love affair”—with his Little League coach the summer he is eight years old. At 15 he begins
hustling, working a park in his small hometown of Hutchinson, Kansas. When he moves to Manhattan with his friend Wendy at age 18, Neil is surprised at how much more money he can make as a prostitute in New York. Despite Wendy’s insistent warning that the city is much more dangerous than back home, Neil continues to hustle until one trick goes terribly wrong:

He fucked my face. “Swallow it deep. Moan for me, let me know how good it is.” That seemed sickening for some reason. He thrust it farther, its head tearing the back of my throat. It choked me, and I winced.

I stood. For the first time, I was scared. For the first time, I was fathoms away from my usual helm of control.

His arm wrapped around my chest. “I’m going to give the slut what he needs.” His thumb wriggled around in my ass crack, then punctured the hole.

I pictured the black scar on his thumbnail, now fishing around in the place where only one other person had been, so many years before. I briefly drifted back there.

“Tell me you like it, Neil, tell Coach how much you like it.”

“No,” I said. “It’s going too far.” My head reeled, and I hoped he could understand the garble. “This is what I don’t do.”

“You were at that place,” he said. “I know what you were there for. You’ll do what I tell you. That’s what a slut does.”

“You’re getting fucked whether you want it or not,” his voice said, and in the cold space of the bathroom it echoed like a barbarous god’s.

My ass became his bull’s-eye. He was inside me. The bathroom light crowned him with an enormous halo.

He beat me, matching his arm with the rhythm of his fucking.

I still strained to bat him away. It was too late; he had finished.

He walked out, swatting the light switch. The darkness wasn’t what I needed, but it was close. (243–47)

In a side-by-side comparison, Neil’s bad trick reads like a re-imagined version of Heim’s own “messy” encounter. The communion is produced largely through language: Heim is “baptized” by rain, Neil sees a “halo” around his attacker; in both accounts, the anus is a “bull’s-eye,” a target of violent assault. Both events take place in wet, claustrophobic spaces allowing no room for Heim and Neil to get away. Both events provoke the recall of baseball-related childhood memories. In each case, the victim is abandoned the moment after his attacker ejaculates. Yet where Heim feels nothing (or refuses to acknowledge his feelings), Neil is terrified. Where Heim fails to resist, Neil begs his attacker to stop. Heim feels “baby’s
breaths” against his skin, but Neil feels his flesh being bloodied and rent. Raising the stakes even further, Neil’s john is vocal and brutal, a “barbarous god,” whereas Heim’s partner is just a man in a green-and-white striped shirt. And, in the coup de grâce, Heim’s trick pulls out before ejaculating while Neil feels “hot and gluey spurts bulleting deep inside me . . . ricochet[ing] off my body’s ruined walls, staining me everywhere with their deadly graffiti” (247). Neil experiences a hyper-version of Scott Heim’s first sexual encounter. Not only does Heim present Neil as the clear victim of a rape, but he possibly condemns Neil to die of AIDS as a result—we never find out whether his attacker was HIV-positive, but Neil does not doubt his intuition that he has been infected by the man. Reading “Ant,” we are not even told whether Heim’s trick uses a condom during their sex. As pornographically candid as Heim is about his first time, there are some things even he would prefer not to divulge to the reading public. Indeed, though Heim approaches his encounter fearing the contamination of “disease”—no one affliction in particular, mind you—he fails to betray another thought about this concern after the fact. “Ant” leaves the “messy” past behind to focus on Heim’s newfound rapport with his mother, but he does note that when he phones Mom, “I don’t mention friends who are sick, are dying, have died” (283). In “Ant,” as in Mysterious Skin, HIV/AIDS is almost never mentioned by name but seethes always beneath the surface.

To return to the trauma of sexual violence, the key emotional difference between Neil’s encounter and that of Scott Heim is that Neil is allowed a catharsis. After the event, Heim sheds no tears and gives very little thought to what transpired in the groundskeeper’s shed. Neil on the other hand is permitted extensive reflection, immediately after he leaves the attacker-john. He rides the subway toward home: “To forget the pain, I thought about what the night had done. Everything had been hurled out of balance, a sudden and sickening
displacement” (248). Already Neil is rocked by the power of trauma, an event that throws the normal experience of life out of whack. After his body is torn and twisted against himself, a literal “transfiguration of the flesh” to borrow Dorothy Allison’s phrase, Neil experiences a psychic transfiguration of the flesh: “I pulled down the lip of my boxers and stared at my dick. It was repulsive. I hated it” (249). Neil also feels the power of trauma to divide time, to create a before and an after: “The boxers dropped to the floor, landing beside a green-and-yellow striped shirt I’d worn that afternoon. I sat, picked it up, held it to my face. I breathed the scent of how I was before” (249). And finally, in the silence of his own apartment, Heim allows Neil to do what he, himself, did not (or could not) do after his own violent experience: he cries.

I do not find it useful to make the argument that the story of Neil’s rape in Mysterious Skin reveals some truth about Scott Heim’s ambivalent experience in “Ant” that the author is unwilling to face. Taken together, however, Neil’s account does seem to be a traumatic repetition of Heim’s story—a retelling that may not be more factually accurate, but does have the power to reveal psychic truths that were inaccessible the first time around. Dorothy Allison “testifies eloquently to the value of fiction for the telling of shameful truths”:

That our true stories may be violent, distasteful, painful, stunning, and haunting, I do not doubt. But our true stories will be literature. No one will be able to forget them, and though it will not always make us happy to read of the dark and dangerous places in our lives, the impact of our reality is the best we can ask of our literature. (qtd. in Cvetkovich 100)

Cvetkovich is fast to throw in the caveat that, since Allison’s work “is a novel, one should not be too quick to assume that she means truth in any simple sense” (100). The muddying of “truth” across the fiction/nonfiction divide reminds one of Cathy Caruth’s insistence that, where trauma is concerned, it may be necessary to allow “history to arise where immediate understanding may not” (11). If, as Caruth suggests, lost traumatic experience must be
reclaimed through synthetic narratives about the past (collective “memories,” perhaps), then
fiction is an indispensable route to those truths emerging from “dark and dangerous places in
our lives.” It is appropriate that “Ant” was published in an autobiographical collection of gay
writers’ coming out stories. No two writers share the same biography, but each is marked by
various traumas indicative of growing up gay. Out of many personal stories emerges a
collective narrative of pain, struggle, and (hopefully) perseverance. Presumably Heim is not
Neil, just as Allison is not Bone (the protagonist of *Bastard out of Carolina*). Yet the affinities
between “Ant” and *Mysterious Skin* create a sense that both tales, whether nonfiction or
fiction, reveal themselves to be “our true stories.” Even the “us” that Allison refers to above
(Does she mean gay people? The sexually abused? Incest survivors?) seems to expand to
accommodate all those who experience trauma and, redundantly, all who have been rejected,
ignored, or oppressed by the ruling majority.

**THE ONLY THING WORSE THAN BAD MEMORIES IS NO MEMORIES AT ALL**

When Scott Heim looks back to the moment he set down to record the story of the
violent encounter that took his virginity, he pays attention to the difficulty in translating
(traumatic) experience into narrative. Nodding to the unconscious forces at work, he explains
that by the time he got around to writing his story, it had already faded to a whisper of “what
really happened.” Yet his description of the event itself is drained of emotional content, and he
acknowledges that the experience left him in a state of unreflective numbness. In the trauma
paradigm of Cathy Caruth, the punctual event does not seem to have been fully experienced
when it actually happened. Instead, as I have argued, the trauma of the event seems to be
realized through Heim’s fiction, when Neil McCormick is raped in *Mysterious Skin*. In the
nonfiction of “Ant,” the violent sex is relayed in detached, matter-of-fact detail, but ultimately
serves the greater narrative of Heim’s emotional breakthrough with his mother. Indeed, by the logic of the essay Heim’s encounter serves only to set up the strengthening of filial bonds. The manner in which the story of his brutalization by a strange man is subsumed and redeemed by his mother’s acceptance of his homosexuality suggests there are darker elements working under the surface. After Heim’s mother finds his diary—the document in which he recorded the Campanile incident as mere and unremarkable sex—he condemns the book to a bonfire. He cites his mother’s transgression as the reason it had to be destroyed. Yet there is something strange about the timing here. The night that Heim’s mother revealed what she had done was the night of their revelatory conversation, when his queerness was dragged into the light. It is also the moment his mother shares some of her own secrets: “She soon confessed the worst moments from her childhood, the fact that her father had sexually abused her and her sisters. She’d never loved my dad, and had married at eighteen only to escape her family and home” (282). Of his own negative experience with sex, Heim concludes, “Telling her the messy details about Mr. Green-and-White-Stripes seemed unnecessary now” (282). Why, then, does this turn of events necessitate the diary’s annihilation?

“Ant” demonstrates the tendency of trauma, for all its “messiness” and incomprehensibility, to dissolve into easy-to-assimilate narratives. It may be that Heim’s diary has to be destroyed because its scanty account of his rape is a lie. Because the object is history, Heim is free to construct from the present a story that contains meaningful facts. Still, though the revised account is obscenely graphic, it is oddly bloodless and cold. Any impact of that encounter is denied and replaced with the revelation of his mother’s childhood sexual abuse, all to serve the ideal of a gay coming-out narrative. “Ant” begins with Heim as a teenager who is “different.” He comes to terms with his sexuality, experiments with gay sex, and is finally
able to be honest with his family; the truth brings them closer than ever before. Heim’s tale squeezes itself into this familiar narrative scheme, which is able to simultaneously incorporate and deny the traumatic nature of his sexual experience. The result is that the trauma of sexual violence is present in “Ant” only on a symptomatic, unspoken level—a surprising choice considering that Mysterious Skin takes an acutely critical look at the way sexual trauma can mutate to accommodate familiar narratives.

“The summer I was eight years old, five hours disappeared from my life. I can’t explain.” The opening lines of Mysterious Skin set up the central mystery of the book: What happened to Brian Lackey during his “lost time”? Already there is the sense that the timeline of Brian’s life has been transfigured. Monica Michlin writes of the “fundamental ambivalence” of gay authors toward the bildungsroman. “[H]ow does one write about the construction of identity if identity begins in the consciousness of being different, of being abused because one is different, different because one is abused . . . ?” (5). Mysterious Skin never betrays a conclusive statement as to Brian’s sexuality, but he is marked as different from the other boys in a particularly un-masculine way, an element I will parse more deeply later. What is certain is that Brian’s identity has formed around his sense of being unlike “normal” people, a sense that hinges on the sexual abuse he suffered and his amnesia of that central trauma. Indeed, Brian does not fully realize the truth about his origins—that is, the origins of his identity—until the final pages of the novel. If Mysterious Skin is a bildungsroman of sorts, it appropriately does not begin with Brian’s birth or infancy, but immediately after his first abusive encounter, an event that comes to define him. Monica Michlin suggests that traumatic violence “in the abused LGBT child’s story implies a symbolic death: from (heterosexual) childhood to rebirth as ‘other’” (5). To stress this idea, Mysterious Skin offers an evocative
picture of Brian’s rebirth: “When I came to, I opened my eyes to darkness. I sat with my legs pushed to my chest, my arms wrapped around them, my head sandwiched between my knees. My hands were clasped so tightly they hurt. I unfolded slowly, like a butterfly from its cocoon” (3). The butterfly image suggests a complete transformation, the passage from childhood to maturity. But Brian soon realizes that he is sitting in the crawl space under the porch of his house; if the space is a cocoon, he has not yet emerged. Apparently unable to do so under his own power, Brian calls out for his sister.

I squinted at the sudden light that spilled from the adjoining basement. Warm air blew against my skin. . . . I told her to get our mother. She was still at work, Deborah said. Our father, however, lay sleeping in the upstairs bedroom. “I don’t want him,” I said. My throat throbbed when I spoke, as if I’d been screaming instead of breathing. Deborah reached farther into the crawl space and gripped my shoulders, shimmying me through the door, pulling me back into the world. (4)

Stuck in the cramped, dark compartment, Brian’s senses are shocked at being delivered back into reality. Appropriately, neither of his parents is present at this rebirthing; the absence of the child’s parents and their failure to protect him is a hallmark of each instance of abuse in the book.

Soon Brian begins experiencing symptoms beyond the amnesia, which further mark him as other. Skeptical of his spontaneous fainting spells, Brian’s classmates invent nicknames for him: “Nutcase, they called me. Fake-fuck. Liar, Liar, Pants on Fire” (8). But to Brian’s mind, the real sign of his difference is the lost time, which he comes to explain through a narrative of alien abduction. The absorption of his trauma into this science fiction story begins only weeks after the abuse occurred, when Brian sights a UFO. His strange telling of the event seems to leave open the possibility that it is only a dream. For one thing, it begins and ends with Brian dozing on the living room couch while a B movie plays on television. Lying there in the beginning, he is awakened when a strange man, apparently a friend of his mother, bursts
through the front door and beckons the family (Brian’s father is absent) outside to witness the spectacle. Brian’s description of the spaceship is true to any classic sci-fi conception of a UFO: “It issued a low hum, like the barely audible drone of machines. It looked like two shallow silver bowls, welded mouth-to-mouth into an oval shape. Lights circled the ship’s middle, and they radiated cones of blue. A small rectangular hatchway protruded from the oval’s bottom” (14). Brian even imagines that the spaceship’s inhabitants are looking down on the foursome and imagining they are a family, his disdainful father replaced by “this tall, dark-haired” stranger. The ship hovers away and Brian returns to the sofa, where he sees the TV screen displaying the movie’s closing credits. “As I drifted toward sleep my mind focused on two things, a pair of the summer’s images I’d never forget. I saw the cramped room of the crawl space. . . . And then, equal in power and mystery, I saw the UFO, still out there somewhere, levitating the earth” (16). Instantly the dreamy spaceship encounter is conflated with Brian’s symbolic rebirth from the crawl space.

Unable to deal directly with the traumatic sexual abuse Brian experienced as a child, he taps into images and motifs contained by the culture’s collective unconscious—the dinner-plate UFO, for example—and more directly in science fiction and pulpy “true tales” of alien abduction to explain what has happened to him. Two years after the initial incident, Brian has become obsessed with the idea of extra terrestrials. “I scanned newspapers for flying saucer stories, . . . I borrowed books from the library; examined their sketches and rare spacecraft photographs” (42). Soon Brian’s own story begins to resemble a lurid pulp novel. On the night of Halloween, Brian heads off to an ersatz haunted house: “Out there, the moon hovered above the flat horizon like a jewel surfacing in a black lake. Below it, shadowy farmhouses, silos, and haystacks scattered the fields. A German shepherd chased a rabbit through weeds. Fog began
its nightly slide over Kansas. . . . The headlights shone off the house’s *murky* windows” (emphasis added, 44). The preponderance of clichéd imagery, the kind Brian certainly encounters in his dime-store horror and UFO stories, conveys an overdetermined, self-conscious air of spookiness and predation in Brian’s account. Painted in such ostentatious color, the scene feels about as phony as the haunted house with its corn-syrup-and-food-coloring blood. Yet this is the setting of Brian’s second and final blackout, the second bit of lost time he eventually comes to find was produced by Coach Heider’s abusive intervention. The banality in Brian’s account of that Halloween asserts the tendency of trauma narratives to bend toward collective experience. Brian has no access to this part of his biography—what happened to him that night—but the clichés in his story punctuate what he does know, or needs to believe: that his tale is not uncommon, one that many have heard and some have gone through, just as he has.

In the latter two-thirds the book, Brian is 18 years old and trying vigorously to get to the bottom of his lost time. The displacement of his abuse (and resulting amnesia) onto the fantasy of alien abduction allows him to simultaneously explore and continue to repress the truth about what happened to him at ages 8 and 10. The literature, films, and television programs through which he mediates the (false) reconstruction of his past demonstrate a curious engagement with psychological language. A local tabloid Brian picks up has printed an advertisement for a so-called psychologist specializing in alien abductees. The piece cautions, “Memories of a close encounter may lie buried within your subconscious mind,” and provides a list of “signs and signals” that may indicate an abduction. Examined with trauma in mind, the list is less a catalogue of “signs” than one of symptoms—many of which suggest posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD):
1. Any amount of stolen time; missing hours or even days you can’t account for.
2. Recurring, overwhelming nightmares—especially those of flying saucers or extraterrestrials, or of being examined by these aliens on an observation table.
3. The occurrence of unexplained bruises, sores, nosebleeds, or small puncture wounds.
4. Constant foreboding feelings, paranoia, and sensations of being watched.
5. Fear of the dark or of being outside alone.
6. Unexplained, continued interest in movies, books, or trivia about unidentified flying objects—sometimes to the point of obsession. (100)

The symptoms fit Brian quite well, of course—especially point six. Yet they also offer a template of how the UFO abduction (or child abuse) survivor experiences life (i.e., much like a sufferer of PTSD). 4 Once Brian identifies himself as an abductee, the list items become guidelines to his self-fulfilling prophecy. For example, he notes that he has had “strange dreams,” but it is only after reading the advertisement that he begins actively dreaming about his “alien abduction.” Indeed, he starts to dream about being poked and prodded by moon-eyed extra terrestrials, but it is also through his dreams that he discovers there was another boy present during his encounter—Neil McCormick. The peculiarly ungraspable nature of traumatic experience can explain why for Brian, taking one step further into the fiction of his alien abduction is simultaneously a step closer to the truth.

**BOTH OF THEM SIDE BY SIDE**

Unlike Brian, Neil McCormick seems to remember every minute of his sexual life with the coach. If Brian’s trauma is spun into a story of mystery and science fiction, Neil’s is an illicit work of pornography. Neil refuses to see himself as a victim, perhaps because he

4 Drawing from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual III* (1987), Laura Brown summarizes the symptoms of PTSD: “reexperiencing symptoms, nightmares, and flashbacks; avoidance symptoms, the marks of psychic numbing; and the symptoms of heightened physiological arousal: hypervigilance, disturbed sleep, a distracted mind. But first and foremost, *an event outside the range of human experience*” (100).
experiences his first pangs of queer desire as an eight-year-old before he even meets the coach. Neil’s dad is out of the picture, and just weeks before Little League begins, he finds an issue of *Playgirl* magazine beneath his mother’s bed. Neil finds the images of naked men more powerful than a tornado-producing storm ripping through his town, which he is able to forget while lost in the pages of the magazine. His intimacy with these photographs utterly colors his first perceptions of his future molester at baseball practice: “I noticed the bushy sand-colored mustache that curled at his lips’ corners. I’d been thumbing through Mom’s *Playgirl* almost daily, and I’d started to dream those mustached and bearded cowboys, lifeguards, and construction workers clutching me, their whiskers scratching my face” (21). Neil soon happens upon his first eyewitness experience of sex, waking to the sounds of his mother and a boyfriend in *flagrante delicto* on his backyard swing set. He spies on them from the window: “I watched it all and wondered the things I’ve come to realize, if those personal experience stories in all the porno magazines I read are true, are common things for a kid to wonder in this situation. How would it feel to have my dick in someone’s mouth? To have someone’s in mine?” (25). Neil goes on to describe his mother’s encounter in graphic detail, demonstrating that his language has begun to mimic the prurient style of the magazine that has become his obsession. When his abusive relationship with Coach begins, he already has this erotic discourse on hand to subsume his own experience and connect him to a collective of illicit sexuality.

Like Brian’s story, Neil’s account of that summer—1981, when both boys were eight—is narrated from 1991. In both cases, the younger incarnations of the boys begin to develop narrative languages based on the kinds of texts to which they are exposed. Eight-year-old Brian seeks out lurid UFO tales and eight-year-old Neil is preoccupied with porno—the
two styles they will eventually use to tell their respective stories. In that context, it is no
surprise that 18-year-old Neil is disinclined to portray his younger self as a babe in the woods.
Neil recollects seeing Coach for the first time on the baseball diamond: “Desire
sledgehammered my body, a sensation I still wasn’t sure I had a name for. If I saw Coach now,
say across a crowded bar, that feeling would translate to something like ‘I want to fuck him.’
Back then, I wasn’t sure what to do with my emotion” (22). Neil’s narrative may be
appropriate enough to his adult subjectivity, but it does remain shocking to read of his sexual
relationship with Coach rendered in such sensuous detail: “For most of [the photographs], he
instructed me to look up at him and smile. I stuck out my tongue in one picture. He fingered its
pink tip—I tasted the salt of his skin—and clicked the shutter” (31). As Neil’s encounters with
Coach become more physical, he relays their particulars in ever more disturbing, pornographic
detail, similar to the way he will describe his rape by a violent john later, and the way Scott
Heim narrated his own sexual experience in “Ant.” Still, Neil’s memoir is at its most
harrowing when it regards itself as a tale of doomed romance. Following the summer of 1981,
Neil sees less and less of Coach Heider and their relationship ends.

But he’s still here, in a way I can’t explain. . . . What matters is how, for the first time
in my life, I felt as if I existed for something. . . . Sometimes it’s all I think about: the
times I spent with him. It’s as if he and I were all that mattered. My best dreams
feature him, no one else, the two of us suspended in his sugary-smelling rooms, alone,
as if God had positioned a beam on central Kansas, and Coach and I had stepped
haphazardly into its light. (38)

This sense of being haunted by the past is a central component of the posttraumatic states of
both Brian and Neil. Brian experiences the repetition of his trauma (which is itself a mystery)
as a general malaise manifest in feelings of dread and foreboding, as well as the nightmares of
abduction that come to plague his sleep. Neil’s acting out, however, consciously drives the
repetition of his trauma. As a teenage gigolo, he is continually reenacting his first sex act, after
which Coach awarded him a prize of five dollars. The climax of Mysterious Skin approaches as the two boys come closer to meeting one another. The narrative each one has constructed around his boyhood sexual abuse—Brian’s psychogenic amnesia with an overwhelming sense of horror and violation; Neil’s full memory with the denial that any (much less, profound) psychological trauma has been sustained—has the power to shatter the other.

Monica Michlin asserts that the novel sabotages the typical bildungsroman frame “by fragmenting perspectives,” “breaking the chronological linearity symbolic of ‘progress’ (through the irruption of traumatic flashbacks . . . ),” and “splitting the child into two characters—in Mysterious Skin, Neil and Brian might represent two opposite futures for the same abused boy” (3). I agree that Heim creates fragmented perspectives on childhood sexual abuse and demonstrates opposite ways of dealing with the trauma of that abuse. But he is also careful to show that the abuse each boy suffered was unique and tells its own story. Indeed, Heim attempts to illustrate crucial differences between acute, punctual trauma and more extended, complicated experiences of trauma. Brian undergoes the traumatizing sexual abuse on two isolated occasions: the first with Neil at Coach’s house, and the second alone, two years later, literally lost in the woods on Halloween. Neil sustains an entire season of abuse, one that comprises an untold number of individual trysts, and the creation of a relationship Neil comes to see as a love affair. The boys’ situations are similar—they both have busy or inattentive mothers, absent or apathetic fathers—but they are quite different in personality even before each crosses paths with Coach Heider. Neil’s athletic prowess makes him Coach’s star player; he is outgoing and sexually precocious. His experiences with Coach push him further in that direction: “For the rest of my days I would want it. I would see sex everywhere, splinters shoved into each molecule of each space, saturating everything I saw and smelled and
tasted and touched” (38). Brian is Neil’s opposite: he is meek, weak, and downtrodden, by his father and classmates alike. Ten years on, little has changed for Brian. He is entirely friendless, a bookworm and a mama’s boy who decides to stay home after high school and attend community college. In both cases, the abuse seems to arrest the boys’ development in 1981—as time goes on, they become hyper-versions of their childhood selves. In spite of their different experiences, Neil and Brian’s fragmented experiences do each seem to represent half of a complete understanding of what happened, insofar as Neil has the content of the memories and Brian understands how affectively devastating, indeed traumatic, the abuse has been. Neil seems to recognize the danger of this prospect as soon as Brian rematerializes in his life.

The summer of 1991, after the boys have graduated from high school, Brian tracks down Neil’s house only to find he has just shipped off to New York City. But Brian does become acquainted with Neil’s friend Eric, who writes Neil a letter explaining Brian’s theory that a UFO abducted the two boys together. Neil finds the prospect “astounding and irresistible,” but quickly begins to connect the idea to his relationship with Coach:

> It was love, I told myself. Coach had loved me. But there had been others, boys whose faces I’d seen smiling from his photo albums. And I could remember three separate times when he’d brought other boys home to join in, to add fuel to the forbidden. Had one of the three been Brian? These boys’ faces stayed vague, beyond surfacing. Perhaps Coach’s emotions for them had cause me to feel jealous, inadequate, or damaged; whatever the reason, I had dislocated my memories of them. . . . When it came to names, I remembered Coach and nothing more. (227)

Neil’s love story begins to unravel upon its first collision with Brian’s mystery/sci-fi narrative. The latter reveals that Neil too has pockets of amnesia around his time with Coach, specifically those incidents that undermine his romantic fantasy and expose Coach as predatory and promiscuous. Seeing that the other narrative is in direct competition with his own, Neil decides, “Whatever recollections Eric’s new friend held, I couldn’t allow them to
interfere with mine” (228). But Neil cannot help but think about Brian and what the two must have done together with Coach. Soon he reaches a conclusion, “This person I didn’t know, this boy I’d shared with Coach, had managed to infect me somehow, to ruin my once-beautiful memories” (240). Brian’s narrative begins to crumble as well. As clearer memories begin to surface in his dreams, he realizes the UFO narrative cannot be real; something else must have happened to him. “And I think I know what it was. I know, but I don’t know” (262). Trauma blurs the lines between knowing and not knowing; Brian has all the clues necessary to solve the mystery, but he remains unable to do so without Neil providing his part of the story. The two narratives must come together—perhaps less as two puzzle pieces forming a whole than as parts of an explosive that will blow on contact.

**THE LIFE WE USED TO LOVE**

The two competing narratives that spring from sexual abuse in *Mysterious Skin* may be read as perverse (perhaps *queer*) incarnations of the two competing attitudes Christopher Castiglia identifies as responses to the AIDS crisis. Responding to certain gay neoconservatives—journalists who view AIDS as the direct result of a hedonistic, amoral gay culture—Castiglia brands their attitude *counternostalgia*: “a look back in fury at the sexual ‘excesses’ of the immature, pathological, and diseased pre-AIDS generation” (160). To a certain extent, Castiglia explains, counternostalgia represents a form of amnesia, a willful forgetting of queer “options for nonnormative identification, intimacy, and pleasure” that have been shut down not by AIDS itself, but by reactionary politics demanding gays assimilate to heteronormative standards. In the face of this “assault,” Castiglia calls for a strategic *countermemory*, a way of remembering the past that emphasizes its “faith in collectivism, social expansion, and sexual inventiveness” (154). He argues such “memory” is politically
necessary to recharging a queer activism that resists normalization. The key to Castiglia’s scheme is strategy. Although he decries counternostalgic narratives as factually inaccurate, his countermemory too requires a strategic un-remembering. “It is easy to forget,” writes Gregory Woods, “that a lot of writing from the Golden Age between Stonewall and AIDS was filled with foreboding. . . . It is clear that gay writers had a nagging suspicion that the sexual festival of gay liberation was too good (to those to whom it was good) to be true: it could not continue indefinitely” (360). Perhaps there is an unarticulated distinction being made in Castiglia’s argument between the gay past and the queer past, the dominant former being marked (in contrast to the vibrant positives Castiglia highlights) by rampant looks-ism, consumerism, and conformity. Of course, Castiglia does not attempt to assert that the golden 1970s were all good, but merely that something valuable and queer has been suppressed by a hegemonic posture of vilifying the past. The complex reality of the past (obscured by the impossibility of constructing a coherent, disinterested narrative of history) is not relevant to the project of resisting gay normativity.

Complex, ambiguous, and ambivalent elements of—and feelings toward—the past are, however, important to my project. Although Castiglia is writing from the year 2000, he makes no important political distinction between pre- and post-protease inhibitor eras, perhaps rightly so. To his goal, the “end of AIDS” may seem just another handful of dirt on the coffin of antinormative queer activism, a further impediment to reversing damage already sustained. For

5 John-Manuel Andriote questions the demands of the gay ghetto: “Rather than providing genuine liberation, gay life in the ghettos had created another sort of oppression with its pressure to conform to social expectations of what a gay man was ‘supposed’ to be, believe, wear, and do” (24). In a similar vein, Gregory Woods notes the demand put on literature to conform to narratives about gay life deemed acceptable by gay critics: “[N]othing so severely limited the range of out gay novelists as the imperative to provide relentlessly positive images and unambiguously happy endings” (341).
him the past era in need of a savvy remembering is the so-called Golden Age of the 1970s. As AIDS is the catastrophe that brings the gay Golden Age to a crashing stop, that era can be defined as existing entirely before trauma (that is, the acutely fatal and catastrophic trauma produced by the health crisis). In Mysterious Skin, Scott Heim also looks at the past through the incompatible lenses of counternostalgia and countermemory, but the age he wants to remember is not an Edenic time before the disaster struck: It is the time of the disaster itself. The novel does not make the claim that sexual abuse is equivalent to the AIDS crisis, but it does illustrate the effects of both traumas and the struggle of making each representable.

If we transpose Castiglia’s categories, Brian Lackey comes to represent the attitude of counternostalgic amnesia. Unable to remember the past, he understands that it is the site of something terrible, a crime that produced echoes affecting the present. Neil McCormick then is a vessel of countermemory. He looks back in love, resisting dominant narratives of child abuse and seeing his time with Coach as vibrant and animating, giving his life purpose. Recast in this light, counternostalgia and countermemory remain strategies, but appear also to be symptoms of posttraumatic pathology. Yet Neil’s disconcerting countermemory exhibits a strange resemblance to the valuable queerness Castiglia hopes to retrieve. He cites Michael Warner: “[Gay neoconservatives] are interested in sex only insofar as it lends itself to respectability and self-esteem; and forget unconscious desire, or the tension between pleasure and normalization . . .” (qtd. in Castiglia 158). I do not wish to suggest that Warner or Castiglia would include in their definition of “sex” any kind of (unwanted) abuse, much less the sexual abuse of a young boy. But Neil does not see himself as an abused child, however much the novel and reader must. In refusing victimhood on that level and taking pleasure, however perverse, in his memory, Neil naturally embodies the queer ideal that opposes respectability and normal ways
of desire.

**Nobody Writes Them Like They Used To**

The presence of AIDS in *Mysterious Skin* poses an uneasy correlation between the two traumas of child abuse and cataclysmic disease. Like the twisted memories of past sexual trauma, AIDS smolders in the background of the novel, always threatening to irrupt—and sometimes doing so. It is perhaps not a coincidence that the boys’ season of sex abuse begins in June 1981, the same month that AIDS was “discovered” by medical science and the time widely recognized as the dawn of the crisis. The beginning of AIDS-related trauma is consequently linked to the onset of abuse trauma in the book. Although the entire narrative of *Mysterious Skin* takes place after the AIDS epidemic has begun, the word *AIDS* is only used twice (*HIV* never appears), and then only in situations where it is detached from the disease’s power to bring on terror and death. In the first instance, a posse of rednecks harasses Neil and flamboyantly dressed Eric at a diner, informing the two that “this is an AIDS-free zone” (191). In the popular gay = AIDS equation, the disease is merely a label to mark the boys as outsiders and yet another reason to loathe queers. The word pops up again only a few pages later, as Eric worries that Neil’s forays into hustling will lead to “herpes and syphilis and AIDS” (196). Here AIDS is also a sign, one of the many nasty consequences of unsafe promiscuous sex. The epidemic is also referred to obliquely throughout the text. Neil daydreams about what became of Coach, and wonders whether “disease hasn’t killed him” (38). Brian notices a newspaper headline blaring “ACTOR DIES AT 32” (185). The novel is rife with similarly indirect examples, but the refusal to consistently give AIDS a name is most surprising when Neil comes into direct physical contact with afflicted (or presumably afflicted) bodies.

Hustling in New York, Neil is picked up by Zeke, a businessman in from Los Angeles.
As Zeke undresses, Neil searches for the words to describe his body:

“Skinny” and “slim” missed the mark. “Emaciated” was better. His knees were square bulbs, floating in his legs. His ribs made me recollect a section of abandoned railroad I’d once seen pushing from the cracked earth after the Cottonwood River’s flood waters had receded.

But worse than the knees and the ribs was Zeke’s skin. . . . Purplish brown lesions scattered across his stomach and chest, angry blemishes that looked ready to burst. More marks disfigured his shoulder, an ankle, his knee’s knobby vicinity. He was a compressed landscape, a relief map. (234)

Neil comes up with many words to make sense of the vision before him, but AIDS is not among them. Instead Zeke’s disfigured body appears as a landscape ravished by natural disaster, and a map that seems to lead Neil into the past. Indeed, as the job progresses—Zeke asks only for a backrub—Neil’s thoughts turn to his old home: “I was locked here, in this new place where KS no longer meant the abbreviation for Kansas, but something altogether different” (235). The not naming becomes exquisitely self-conscious here; Neil understands he is seeing a body riddled with Kaposi’s Sarcoma, but the actual name of the illness (and the condition that has brought it on) is unspeakable, unnamable—just like the traumatic nature of his past with Coach, which must be expunged to preserve his erotic fantasy. Neil approaches the devastation circulating in words like AIDS and Kaposi’s Sarcoma, but all he finds is a map back to Kansas.

The encounter with Zeke, with AIDS, affects Neil strangely. “For the first time in my life,” he tells Wendy, “I’m bothered by it. Sex. After tonight, everything just feels fucked up” (238). Since Neil’s abusive initiation into sex at age eight, it has been his pleasurable compulsion. Now for the first time the act is revealed to be deeply problematic and demanding of scrutiny. The intrusion of AIDS in Neil’s life is closely tied to his eventual acceptance that his sex with Coach was, in fact, highly damaging and traumatizing; that it was not love.

Immediately after his confrontation with Zeke’s AIDS-infected body, Neil decides that Brian’s
alien abduction narrative has “infected” him and tainted his beautiful fantasy of the past. Like a virus, Brian’s story begins to infiltrate Neil’s memory and replicate there. It is in this mentally contaminated state that Neil’s run-in with the violent john occurs. Although the john demonstrates no signs of illness, Neil concludes that without a doubt his rapist is HIV-positive and that he has transmitted the virus during the encounter. Neil’s rape is the traumatic repetition that finally collapses the crippled delusion of his “love” with Coach. The destruction of his romantic narrative is at last inseparable from his physical destruction, being raped, beaten, and infected. Only in this state of absolute ruination can Neil return to Kansas and, with Brian, confront the trauma Coach had inflicted.

In “Refusing the Name: The Absence of AIDS in Recent American Gay Male Fiction,” James W. Jones argues,

> The name AIDS evokes certain images that circumscribe the ability to transcend the limits they impose. By refusing to utter or write the name AIDS . . . the author pushes the disease to the edge of fiction; it is the effects upon the lives of individuals and the life of the community that form the centers of these stories, rather than the disease itself and its public mythology. (228)

Perhaps this explains why Scott Heim only uses the word twice and in the context of cultural assumptions about homosexuality and gay sex. But I believe he also refuses AIDS in order to trouble the line between the widespread cultural trauma of AIDS and the acute sexual trauma of two boys that animates Mysterious Skin. There is a sense in the book that the abuse suffered by Brian and Neil is, like AIDS, a specifically queer form of trauma. As Monica Michlin writes, the role of the abused child in gay fiction demonstrates how trauma can be a formative experience to the queer identity. Just as AIDS victims are marked as deviants, so too are abuse victims marked as being different—“abused because one is different, different because one is abused” (Michlin 5). Although Neil is a masculine, athletic boy, he is also precociously
homosexual, a fact that Coach seems to pick up intuitively. Neil’s difference, his budding gay desire, makes him a suitable target for Coach’s assault. Brian Lackey grows into an asexual teenager, but the text does take steps to code him as gay. As his name suggests, Brian is a boy lacking—he is the worst player on his baseball team and his father is constantly berating him for not living up to any boyhood standards of masculinity. Waiting at the doctor’s office, Brian skims through women’s magazines. After disappointing his father by quitting baseball, he tries to repair the damage by taking on the traditionally feminine task of preparing and serving food to the man of the house. Furthermore, out-and-proud Scott Heim has indicated that Brian is meant to resemble a young version of himself. The text marks Brian as gay, and his inchoate queerness also seems to make him prey to homosexual pedophilia.

Because the child abuse in *Mysterious Skin* is so queer in its configuration (it happens to “others”; it produces “others”), Heim forces the reader to consider that trauma alongside other gay traumas like homophobia and, especially, AIDS. Perhaps by 1995, when the book was published, the gay psyche’s ability to engage the trauma of AIDS was so exhausted that the crisis could no longer be represented directly. Yes, the epidemic is literally present in the book, but it exhibits little violence and horror in and of itself. The anguish of AIDS is a faded presence, pulled into relief only through the novel’s shocking sexual violence. I do not believe that the child abuse and other displays of violence on parade in *Mysterious Skin* are actually about AIDS. But its oblique take on the trauma of AIDS acknowledges that something has slipped, some fragments of the story are no longer accessible, and which they are remains

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6 In an interview to promote the film version of *Mysterious Skin*, Heim responds to the question of how much the actors playing Neil and Brian match his authorial vision of the characters, saying, “Really accurately. Surprisingly, almost frighteningly so. There are shots in the film where Brady [Corbet, who plays Brian] looks a lot like I looked at that age” (Lee).
unclear. This reflects the apparent nature of trauma itself, that it can never be “about” one thing. Because trauma resists the ordinary referentiality of experience, it must make its presence felt in strange gestures, acting on the psyche in ways that seem impossible to ever fully articulate. Even after Neil repudiates his sentimental narrative about Coach, he refuses to rebrand himself a victim. “But something had changed. ‘Love’—that was what I’d always termed the emotion I carried for Coach. Now it was different, an emotion I had no adequate word for” (289). He does not feel anger or disgust; contempt, remorse, shame, or torment. Instead Neil discovers that after trauma, there are no words.
Chuck Palahniuk introduces a 2004 edition of his novel *Fight Club* with a laundry list of ways popular culture has perpetuated the craze set off by his book (or, more accurately, by its blockbuster film adaptation of 1999). From high-fashion runway shows staged in “Milan’s dirty concrete basements” to journalists heralding a crisis in American masculinity to scores of copycat fight clubs springing up around the world, Palahniuk is utterly bemused at the response (xiii). He seems especially fascinated and perplexed by unintended readings of his text. Take this one example:

> On a plane back to Portland, an airline flight attendant leaned close and asked me to tell him the truth. His theory was the book wasn’t really about fighting at all. He insisted it was really about gay men watching one another fuck in public steambaths. I told him, yeah, what the hell. And he gave me free drinks for the rest of the flight. (xviii–xix)

This anecdote passes without comment, but, for his part, Palahniuk does offer a simple account of what he did intend the novel to do: “present . . . a new social model for men to share their lives. It would have to give men the structure and roles and rules of a game—or a task—but not too touchy-feely. It would have to model a new way to gather and be together” (xvi).

Taken with the flight attendant’s reading, the two understandings of *Fight Club* may look like a before-and-after tableau. By the mid-1990s, institutional responses to AIDS—the shutting down of bathhouses and sex clubs—had drastically limited possibilities for men to meet and have sex. Furthermore, as I asserted in chapter 1, opportunities for (gay) men to be together around (gay) activism had largely disappeared. Under these pervasive conditions, Palahniuk sees the need for a new way for men to be together—the fight club. Like the bathhouse, his
model offers athletic, male-only physical intimacy in semi-public spaces, an enterprise of dubious legality. Only in Palahniuk’s framework, the sex is replaced by violence, and homosexuality is replaced by heroic, “all-man” masculinity. Indeed, the fight club model evades the problem of sexually transmitted virus—a definitive component of the fearful sexual climate during the first 15 years of AIDS—as well as the stigma surrounding gayness:

Palahniuk’s characters are unaffected by the mainstream reaffirmation, in the wake of AIDS, that homosexuality is synonymous with perversion, contamination, and doom. The fight club model offers men a way of being together that flouts conventional mores and enables intense physical and spiritual sensation, without having to deal with any of the problematic issues attending gayness. In other words, Palahniuk stakes out a voluptuous space for homosocial interaction while evading the mark of gayness that would make the book unpalatable to mainstream audiences. If it seems to take a measure of fancy footwork to impose a queer reading on *Fight Club*, perhaps we should begin with a puzzling biographical point: Chuck Palahniuk is gay—and does not want you to know it.

**IT’S PROBABLY JUST PARANOIA**

In the fall of 2003, Palahniuk confided to Karen Valby, a journalist profiling him for a piece in *Entertainment Weekly*, that he lives with a long-term same-sex partner. These remarks, it was understood, were off the record. Just as the magazine was about to hit newsstands, however, Palahniuk was led to believe that Valby intended to reveal his sexuality in the article. Panicked, he ventured a preemptive strike in the form of an audio-blog on his official website, “The Cult,” outing himself to his fans and making “highly personal allegations relating to the interviewer and a member of her family” (Chalmers). It turned out that Valby had not, in fact, betrayed Palahniuk’s trust; she divulged only that the novelist “has no wife, and declines to
discuss his personal life on the record, preferring to keep his fans guessing” (Valby 2). Palahniuk’s online tirade was quickly removed from “The Cult,” but it was too late to restore the fallen veil: he was now a publicly gay man. The writer has hardly embraced this aspect of his persona. In an interview nearly a year after his troubled confession, Palahniuk implies to Robert Chalmers of *The Independent* that he feels only relief now that “the big bomb has exploded.” Yet when Chalmers presses him further on the subject—Were his publishers against his coming out? Has he experienced any fallout since the revelation?—Palahniuk grows taciturn and announces, mid-response, that he must leave to attend to personal errands. Afterward, in a follow-up e-mail (he had promised to provide Chalmers with the names and contact information of some of his friends) Palahniuk writes conclusively, “I made it clear to my publishers that I’d do no more personal profiles. Any meetings would be about my work. . . . to that extent I can’t put you in touch with these people” (Chalmers). This exchange occurred in 2004, and if you think Palahniuk might have become less skittish about acknowledging his sexuality in the years since, you would be wrong—sort of.

Last year, he granted his first interview to the gay press, giving audience to Austin Bunn of *The Advocate*. During their talk, Palahniuk points out the location of his first date with his “spouse” of over 15 years, and claims he has been out “for a million years”—just not to the press (Bunn 3). After the initial interview, Bunn says he contacted the administrator of “The Cult,” which operates independently, to find out why the website neglects (intentionally, it seems) to mention Palahniuk’s sexuality or the gender of his “long-term committed relationship” partner. Just hours after the inquiry, Bunn explains, “Palahniuk pulled out of the *Advocate* photo shoot and called to say he was no longer cooperating with this article. My line of questioning had somehow triggered his sense of betrayal, but I was baffled and shocked”
The reporter and reader alike are left to wonder why, if Palahniuk is indeed comfortable as an openly gay figure, he must maintain such a punishing chokehold on the dissemination of that aspect of his persona. Perhaps the answer is related to the fact that, to this day, Palahniuk’s readership is composed largely of young straight men, unaware of the author’s homosexuality. One imagines that these fans are more likely to visit Chuck’s edgy website than pick up a copy of The Advocate. Are we to think that Palahniuk chooses to remain, to some extent, in the closet? That he is fine with gay people knowing about his sexuality, but not his (potentially homophobic) straight fans? Austin Bunn wants to resist such conclusions. “Palahniuk is not in the closet,” he writes. “The whole question misses the point. But a part of him seems to recognize the utility of shadows, the function of mystery. He does not want to be known” (3).

Fair enough. But remaining is the question of how we are to approach the potentiality of queer content in Palahniuk’s work. He has shown himself to be equivocal and erratic when it comes to revealing his gayness to the world. He has not entirely shunned queer subject matter, but all of his male protagonists have been straight. Even as these characters struggle with the vagaries of contemporary masculinity, it is from an ostensibly heterosexual point of view. (Indeed, a major theme of Fight Club seems to be the negative, feminizing effects of our culture upon [straight] men.) If Chuck Palahniuk’s writing evinces—like the man himself—a complex, ambivalent attitude toward sexual identity in the “post-protease” era, then we may expect its queer content to manifest in oblique and surprising ways.

Bunn says as much in the article, noting that those male college students of his who are smitten with Palahniuk’s work are always surprised to learn he is gay (3). Additionally, one finds in the forum section of “The Cult” several discussion threads (the most recent from this year) in which fans debate whether Palahniuk is, in fact, gay (“Chuck Palahniuk Gay????????”).

Bunn informs us that Invisible Monsters features a pre-op transsexual, and Fugitives and Refugees, a travel book he wrote about Portland, highlights several gay sex clubs (3).
Austin Bunn asserted that the question of whether Palahniuk is a closeted writer
“misses the point,” in 2008, but it is unclear what the missed point is, anyway. That nowadays
the sexuality of an author is (or should be considered) irrelevant when reading his fiction? That
Palahniuk is so unique and eccentric, a broad category like “gay” offers no insight into his
thinking? Regardless, we must ask whether the issue is likewise irrelevant when considering
the work he published years before his homosexuality was known. In the mid-1990s, Palahniuk
would already have been dating his partner and, presumably, openly gay to his family and
friends. Yet he was also sensitive to commercial demands as he was composing Fight Club,
which would be his first published novel. Indeed, pleasing the masses was integral to
Palahniuk’s process. “In the workshop where I started to write fiction,” he explains, “you had
to read your work in public . . . in a bar or coffeehouse where you’d be competing with the roar
of the espresso machine. . . . Music and drunk people talking. Against all this noise and
distraction, only the most shocking, most physical, dark and funny stories got heard”
(Palahniuk xvii). He would also, we imagine, want to avoid alienating mainstream (straight)
audiences with explicitly gay content (or worse, incurring the wrath of homophobic boozers).
To that end, as well as those arising from his internal ambivalences, Palahniuk had motive to
shy away from the subject of homosexuality—but that does not mean he was entirely
successful. Because Fight Club demonstrates a strange and subtle engagement with gayness,
we may turn to an unlikely source to provide a framework for our investigation. In Closet
Writing/Gay Reading, James Creech attempts to uncover “closeted” gay literatures from the
past (mainly the 19th century). He endeavors to seek out methods by which writers could
express their gay desires—even before the concept of “homosexuality” as such was in cultural
circulation—while minding the parameters of social acceptability. And there are a number of ways, Creech finds, that these “prehomosexuality homosexuals” could “[strike] a responsive chord among homoerotically aware readers”—whether that was quite the writer’s intention or not (70, 75). Here we run headlong into a queer (in both old and new senses of the term) intersection between “prehomosexuality” and “postgayness.” In bringing Creech into the late 20th century, I hope to suggest a kind of continuous queer temporality extending from the past, one in which intimations and liminal expressions of homosexuality have not been rendered obsolete by the success of gay liberation. In other words, I want to show that even in the contemporary age, queerness may demonstrate a tendency toward strange, underground articulations of itself.

James Creech calls attention to the near-impossibility of thinking the past without a modern mindset:

In practice, we still rely (if only implicitly) upon contemporary categories of “gay” and “straight,” “coming out” and staying “in the closet” when we think of the sexuality of a Melville, a Whitman, [etc.]. . . . Even as we wisely caution against naive projection by a contemporary critic, we find it impossible to avoid the conclusion that there were, in nineteenth-century America, what we today can only call homosexuals, men and women who freighted the rhetoric of their declarations and effusions with feelings wholly unacceptable to the contemporary norms of their culture. Epistemic shifts notwithstanding, we can only see them as lesbian or gay. (68)

Creech reminds us that it can be problematic to think of sexuality only by contemporary standards—as a central aspect of identity, informing our experience of the world—whether or not queers of the past understood their sexuality the same way. Yet homosexuality, a desire that forces its subjects into opposition with public standards, surely existed before it was conceived as a social construct. The way that sexuality is thought and known has undergone dramatic shifts since the time of prehomosexuality, but Creech denies this caveat the prohibitive power that might have us throwing our hands up at the enterprise of reading any
homosexuality in the past (an offense for which Larry Kramer indicts all “queer theorists”). Postgay writers seem to want a similar caveat put in place, by insisting on a new epistemic shift that renders obsolete current understandings of homosexuality. Though we can only think of him as gay, the postgay writer would ask us to ignore that facet of his character, often with the explanation that homosexuality is no longer “wholly unacceptable to contemporary norms,” and thus it no longer (necessarily) informs “the rhetoric of [his] declarations and effusions.” As does the vilified queer theorist, postgay writers seem to warn against imposing our ideas of “gay” and “lesbian” in places (and times) they do not belong. Unlike the prehomosexuality writer, however, postgay authors can quite directly ask us not to take into account their sexuality. Such writers may present legitimate arguments on this point, but, as James Creech has demonstrated, it can be strategically useful to ignore the prohibitions against reading queerness. Like Creech, I will take such concerns under consideration and press on undeterred.

It will be useful to revisit a few points that arose during my parsing of “postgay” in chapter 1. From a political perspective, the logic of (some intonations of) postgayness is incoherent: if homosexuality is truly no longer a “big deal,” why must one so laboriously avoid an association with it? Furthermore, postgay often seems to indicate a betrayal of collective political ideals in favor of personal gain. Yes, the gay movement has made great strides in cultural acceptability, but homosexuality remains a liability in many areas, including the national marketplace. A writer with dreams of literary stardom might be wise to keep mum about his queerness. Finally, “postgay” comes out of the contemporary age, which, with its accessible—mandatory, even—categories of sexuality and political precedents for resisting repression, cannot be viewed as equivalent to the time of prehomosexuality. In short, postgay is loaded with several dimensions of sociopolitical anxiety of which prehomosexuality is not.
That caveat in place, however, I wish to establish the affinity of prehomosexuality to postgayness through James Creech’s concept of the wink.

“Rather than transmitting information from one who knows it to one who doesn’t,” explains Creech, “the wink enacts a communion of those already presumed at least preconsciously to know the taboo secret” (94). In effect, the wink may be performed by a pointed image or turn of phrase, anything that a savvy reader might recognize as signifying homosexuality, yet still offers plausible deniability should the point be interrogated by a hostile audience. Although the wink can never be proven per se, “[o]nly willful denial can purge [wink-laden texts] of the yearning gazes and subtle glancings of homoerotic sexuality” (Creech 100). We may observe the wink in action in Chuck Palahniuk’s introduction to Fight Club. Describing how he arrived at the concept behind the novel, he writes, “why not a club where you could ask someone to fight? The way you’d ask for a dance at a disco” (xv). Considering that the “someone” a man would ask for a fight is invariably another man (after all, what self-respecting man would want to fight a woman?), it is logical to carry the same-sex equation into the subsequent phrase regarding a dance (and what kind of man wants to dance with another man?). But the real wink is contained in the very phrasing of the second sentence, especially the word “disco.” Is there a (relatively) young straight man this side of 1979 that talks about going to a “disco” without buckets of irony? As this instance demonstrates, sometimes the wink is so subtle as to be barely apparent. (Indeed, the very act of recording my wink sighting has me wondering if I am hallucinating, seeing the shadow of something that is not actually there.) A stronger case can be made for the anecdote Palahniuk shares about the flight attendant. When he confirms the attendant’s hypothesis that Fight Club is really about “gay men watching one another fuck in public steambaths,” he receives free drinks for the duration
of the trip. Homoerotically aware readers may see the exchange between Palahniuk and the man who “leans close” to him as a sexual transaction, of sorts. But upon closer inspection, this wink is revealed to have another, contradictory, exhibition. In an apparent nod to straight audiences, Palahniuk simultaneously affirms (to the attendant) and dismisses (to the reader) the gay theory with his offhand “what the hell.” *Why not let the gay man think I’m gay too,* he seems to say, *as long as it comes with a nice windfall?* This wink to straights reads like a commercial for Palahniuk’s good-humored hetero-masculinity; he is so secure in his sexuality that the intimation of his being gay is not a problem. Yet knowing as we do that Palahniuk is actually gay himself, the high five to straight readers is revealed as a fake. Instead of acting consciously (or not) to reveal the author’s queerness, this wink acts consciously to conceal; indeed, it acts as a prophylactic against transmission of the gay meaning. The fight club may not be intended as an extended metaphor for gay sex, but Palahniuk does have a vested personal interest in gay sex—and, it would appear, in hiding that fact.

It is here that the postgay wink departs from the prehomosexuality wink. Under Creech’s paradigm, the wink is not only a way to transmit gay feelings under the radar of mainstream perception; it is also a means of assembling evidence that gay content is, in fact, present in a particular author’s work—a way to invite long-gone expressions of homosexuality into conversation with contemporary ones, and allow the past to bump up against the present. The prehomosexuality wink is a way to know that people of the past felt gay yearning. Contemporary subjects are expected to have already adopted a label that reflects their desires and made it known. As such, the postgay wink, emerging as it does from an era of codified sexual categories and dramatically fewer prohibitions against the speaking of queer desire, cannot have the same meaning as the wink laid out by James Creech; Herman Melville’s
“writing from the closet” cannot possibly mean the same thing as Chuck Palahniuk’s “writing from the closet.” Both incarnations of the wink are designed to communicate across the threshold of the closet. But in the 19th century when the category of homosexuality was just emerging, it was inscribed as a moral weakness and one stayed in the closet to evade that imprint; today on the other hand, it is the very act of remaining (hiding) in the closet that constitutes a failure of character. Melville, it is tempting to think, did the best he could in his time, whereas Palahniuk is something of a coward. Yet perhaps this seeming moral failure in the second writer is more complicated than it first appears. Upon further investigation, we find that the postgay wink in Fight Club reacts in a variety of ways to contemporary gay issues.

**THIRTY DIALOGUES BLEED INTO ONE**

In some ways, Chuck Palahniuk is the quintessential postgay novelist. The man is homosexual, but does not focus on explicitly gay topics; he has demonstrated a willingness to engage queer content, but evinces no devotion to it. His attitude toward the public consciousness of his sexuality is wildly fraught, but it is reasonable to assume he has enjoyed open gayness in his personal life since long before he was a published author. More than anything else, however, Palahniuk takes postgayness to its logical conclusion: a place where being openly gay is often indistinguishable from being in the closet. This paradox writhes at the heart of postgay logic: a denial of the sociopolitical significance of “gay” thwarted by a resistance to the category that exposes its ongoing preeminence. Of course, where art and commerce are concerned, the evasion of “gay” often indicates motives of a more practical nature; indeed, Palahniuk has openly expressed his fear of becoming known as a “gay writer.” He tells The Advocate, “I know people who have spun their nationality or their sexuality or their race, but after a few books it’s really limiting and their readership doesn’t want them to
write about anything other than that experience. . . . They find themselves pigeonholed, documenting the same small aspect of self over and over” (Bunn 3). He suggests that the only way to avoid this morass is to keep one’s gayness under wraps, to a certain extent. Therefore unlike James Creech’s wink, through which a prehomosexuality writer may flirt with taboo (but unincorporated) gay effusions, the postgay wink combines a disavowal of sexual identity (or the authority of such categories to inform how we experience life) with a (perhaps involuntary) glance back toward all that may be represented by gay identity—community, vitality, self-actualization; stigma, shame, powerlessness.

Perhaps this is why Fight Club continually flirts with gay desire only to quickly defer a homoerotic reading. Before going further, however, it will be necessary to provide a brief overview of the novel. The story begins as the unnamed protagonist (whom I will call Joe9), a white-collar office drone, is suffering from debilitating insomnia (caused by ennui, it seems). After complaining to a doctor, Joe is told to check out support groups for people struggling with fatal diseases in order to see “real pain.” He finds that the groups provide him a crucial release—“This was freedom. Losing all hope was freedom. . . . Babies don’t sleep this well” (Palahniuk 12). Joe begins going to groups every night of the week, that is, until Marla shows up. Marla is another “tourist” at the support groups, someone who tacitly claims to be among the afflicted, but is not. “Marla’s lie reflects my lie,” Joe narrates, “and all I can see are lies” (13). Her presence at every meeting prevents Joe from achieving the palliative effects to which he has become addicted; he is back to square one. It is around this time that Joe meets Tyler

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9 The protagonist finds a stack of old magazines, in which “organs in the human body talk about themselves in the first person: I am Jane’s Uterus. I am Joe’s Prostate” (49). The formation becomes a gimmick to communicate our hero’s feelings: “I am Joe’s Raging Bile Duct,” “I am Joe’s Smirking Revenge,” etc. (50, 105).
Durden, a rugged bohemian who shares none of Joe’s hang-ups. When Joe returns from a business trip to find that his condo has been mysteriously blown up, he turns to Tyler for a place to stay. After a night of drinking, Tyler asks Joe to “hit me as hard as you can” (43). Joe finds that fighting and being battered provide even more catharsis than the support groups: “Nothing was solved when the fight was over, but nothing mattered” (45). Joe moves in with Tyler, and the two start to gather likeminded men together in a bar basement every week to hold secret fighting meetings—hence “fight club.” Meanwhile, Marla calls Joe to announce she is in the act of committing suicide; she instead reaches Tyler and the two begin a love affair. Fight club balloons in popularity, and Tyler begins setting up franchises around the country. It is at this point Tyler begins to take on a messianic stance among the disaffected men of fight club. No longer satisfied with fight club alone, he invents Project Mayhem in order to “teach each man . . . that he had the power to control history” (113). As Tyler begins to amass an army of men to shake up the status quo through acts of destruction (targeting not people, but symbols of bourgeois capitalism like payphones and ATMs), Joe becomes isolated, feeling rejected by Tyler and kept in the dark about the plans of Project Mayhem. Once a “space monkey,” as the project cadets are known, dies in the line of duty, Joe begins to feel Mayhem has gotten out of hand. He finds out that Tyler has become homicidal, and he tries to shut down fight club and Project Mayhem. It is at this point that the novel’s big reveal occurs—Joe realizes that Tyler is actually a split-off personality of his own psyche. When Joe goes to sleep, Tyler wakes up and runs the terrorist organization he created. Seeing it as the only way to stop Tyler, Joe tucks a gun into his cheek and pulls the trigger. He survives the gunshot, but has apparently undergone a complete psychotic break with reality. As Fight Club ends, the
narrator—Tyler seems to be gone now—is shut up in a mental asylum, which he believes to be heaven.

Before the dramatic revelation about Tyler’s true nature, however, he is presented as something of an object of desire to Joe. In the very first chapter, Joe lays out a seemingly romantic conundrum: “We have sort of a triangle thing going here. I want Tyler. Tyler wants Marla. Marla wants me” (4). The queerness of Joe’s longing is stated clearly enough. But the next phrase confounds that assumption: “I don’t want Marla, and Tyler doesn’t want me around, not anymore. This isn’t about love as in caring. This is about property as in ownership” (4). The issue of frustration is not that Tyler does not want Joe; it is that Tyler does not want Joe around. This is not about love, according to Joe. So is there a sexual component to Joe’s feelings toward Tyler or not? Many similar traces of homoeroticism throughout the novel suggest that there is, and many ensuing qualifications suggest there may not be after all.

Although the story is focalized on Joe and told in the first-person voice, there is reason to interrogate whether the voice of the author does not poke through in places and demonstrate its own conflicting attitudes. This task is obfuscated by the fact that there are many voices that seem to poke through Joe’s as the narration progresses. Flashbacks, quips, how-to technical asides, and, arguably, Tyler’s voice all disrupt a straightforward telling of the plot. Indeed, the very narration of Fight Club seems to attempt something like Tyler’s subliminal disruption of family films with pornography:

A single frame in a movie is on the screen for one-sixtieth of a second. Divide a second into sixty equal parts. That’s how long the erection is. Towering four stories tall over the popcorn auditorium, slippery red and terrible, and no one sees it. . . . Nobody complained. People ate and drank, but the evening wasn’t the same. People feel sick or start to cry and don’t know why. (20, 21)
Tyler views American culture as having fallen into a devitalizing torpor; in order to feel alive, he must disrupt the complacency of the masses, even at undetectable levels. Confrontational sexuality, as in the above, is just one of the means he employs. Like Tyler with his barely-there filmic erection, Palahniuk deploys bursts of disconcerting narrative intrusions, many of which are repetitive and play parallel to the plot-advancing narration. We are barraged by the debris of popular culture in the form of airplane safety announcements, self-help mantras, names of corporations; but they run alongside countercultural intrusions like nihilistic self-destruction mantras, violent “true” histories of common things, and antisocial instructional guides. In the novel’s *in medias res* first chapter, for example, Joe is being held at gunpoint by Tyler atop a building that is about to explode. The telling of the plot is interspersed with instructions on how to make explosives with household items. “I know this because Tyler knows this,” Joe explains, in a refrain repeated throughout the book. Knowing the book’s central conceit, this makes perfect sense. But when Joe does not say outright which thoughts are Tyler’s, it can be hard to tell the difference. This is especially true because the speech of every character (including Tyler) is set off by quotation marks—except Joe. Whether he is alone or in conversation with others, we can never be certain whether Joe’s remarks are spoken aloud or merely thought—or whether he is responding to internal or external stimuli. The device reflects Joe’s psychosis of course, but it also allows Palahniuk to addle readers’ expectations of directly referential narration. The question then becomes whether, amid all the static generated in the telling of *Fight Club*, we can discern coming through more than the author may have intended.
CLOSE YOUR EYES NOW, KID

Outlining the stakes of his engagement with the wink, James Creech writes, “the homosexuality that can be attributed to others with narrative distance and ‘scientific’ objectivity poses far fewer problems for an epistemology of closets than the much less avowable homoerotic contexts defining a first-person narrator or a protagonist who can plausibly be thought to represent aspects of the author” (100). It is nearly impossible to parse a meaningful distinction between Joe’s voice and language that could “plausibly be thought to represent aspects of” Chuck Palahniuk. But because Joe himself is such a cipher, it is difficult not to equate his voice with that of the author. Palahniuk endows his protagonist with a negligible personal history, and gives him no name (with the arguable partial exception of “Joe”—a portmanteau of “John Doe”). There is not so much as a sketch of his physical appearance. Palahniuk never ‘bathes his protagonist in a homoerotic gaze’ as Herman Melville might (Creech 100). Indeed, the first-person perspective is so total that Joe never seems captured in any gaze; he is always the one doing the looking. Biographical points further indicate a resemblance between Joe and Palahniuk: the cultural disillusionment, boring office job, desire for pharmaceutical relief, and spiritual release found in fist fighting¹⁰ are all common to both (Chalmers). As Creech’s work suggests, these contexts make for problematic epistemic readings of Palahniuk’s textual closet. To be sure, there are homoerotic gazes in the

¹⁰Palahniuk claims the same palliative effects of fighting that Joe feels: “Every time I’d feel so good afterwards—being physically and emotionally exhausted, and being able to sleep so well.” There was “also the bond it created with people I’d previously hated—we would hash out our differences in a very physical, intense way, and after that we’d be best friends. I saw so much value in fighting. I still do” (Chalmers).
novel, but they are filtered through Joe’s consciousness every time. Take the scene of Joe and Tyler’s meet-cute:

How I met Tyler was I went to a nude beach. This was the very end of summer, and I was asleep. Tyler was naked and sweating, gritty with sand, his hair wet and stringy, hanging in his face. . . .

We were the only people on the beach. . . .

His name was Tyler Durden, and he was a movie projectionist with the union, and he was a banquet waiter at a hotel, downtown, and he gave me his phone number.

And this is how we met. (22, 23)

The passage reads like a typical cruising encounter. One man gazes at the body of another, the two get to talking, and phone numbers are exchanged. If this dance is not homoerotic enough already, there may be a subtext of unanswered questions inspired in the (homoerotically aware?) reader: Is Joe naked as well? What kind of nude beach appears to be male only? Joe conveys the scene without a modicum of emotion, and, for all the conditional details about Tyler’s appearance, we get almost no sense of what the man’s body actually looks like, what is under the hair and grit. It is almost as if Palahniuk is daring his reader to draw a conclusion in the absence of definitive evidence. I wrote above that the postgay wink comprises a disavowal of “gay” and a simultaneous glance back toward it. In this case, the glance toward gayness is manifest in the cruising parallel, but the disavowal is less apparent. In effect, the dispassionate, Spartan nature of the narration itself constitutes a repudiation of the queer reading. Where is the nod toward excitement and longing? The flatness of affect, and the scantiness of sensual detail, suggests that the homoerotically charged reader is wise to look elsewhere for titillation—certainly not in a flashback told by Joe.

It is reasonable to wonder whether the homoerotic content of the scene is not so obvious, even to straight readers, that the failure to explicitly fulfill that potential is tantamount to a denial. That is to say, because there is no longer a perceived need to conceal
homosexuality, if it is not made explicit, it is not there. In an age of multiple (obligatory) sexual identity categories, Palahniuk seems to suggest there is no place for an ambiguous sexual modality. Is there a wink here directed at readers who pick up on the lurking homoerotic interpretation? Readers who, in this day and age, could be practically anyone? In a small way, yes. But the main event here is the postgay wink, one that rewards only the reader who detects queer potential but refuses to congratulate herself on the discovery, the reader who sees the homoeroticism as indicative of nothing in particular, the reader who is willing to step into the postgay and refuse to consider that a character’s sexuality carries significant connotations. Indeed, the homoeroticism in the beach scene reads as so overdetermined, yet still so banal, that Palahniuk seems to be saying, You think you’ve picked up on something hidden and meaningful? Well you haven’t!

**ALL WE’VE GOTTA DO IS BE BRAVE**

For a deeper perspective on this attitude, let us examine another major shift separating the era of prehomosexuality from that of postgayness. Homosexuality is today so much a part of the cultural consciousness that it is difficult to imagine a reader who is not a good measure “homoerotically aware.” Michael S. Kimmel writes that modern masculinity is actually consolidated around homophobia. He cites psychologist Robert Brannon’s four tenets of American manhood: relentless repudiation of the feminine; achievement of power, success, wealth, and status; the will to remain calm and never display emotion; and an aura of manly daring and aggression (125–26). The fight club model established by Palahniuk is designed to offer men—portrayed as bloodless office drones with no outlet to express their manhood in a feminized culture—a way to reclaim their true masculinity along exactly the lines Brannon sets out. I am interested in the intersection between that rubric and the performance of nominally
homoerotic behavior, particularly in demonstration of “manly daring and aggression.” The fear of being called a sissy, asserts Kimmel, is the driving force behind the four wheels of masculinity. As a result, (straight) men are compelled to continually perform their manhood and reassert their masculinity in the eyes of other (straight) men through the renunciation of homosexuality and homosexuals. The values of women must likewise be repudiated in order to be a proper man:

Men act as though they were being guided by (or rebelling against) rules and prohibitions enunciated by a moral mother. . . . [As a result,] all the niceties of masculine behavior—modesty, politeness, neatness, cleanliness—come to be regarded as concessions to feminine demands, and not good in themselves as part of the behavior of a proper man. (qtd. in Kimmel 127)

In other words, refined, mannerly behavior is sissy stuff. Real men are offensive and disgusting—aggressively so. The soi-disant disenfranchised men of Fight Club use their sneering, masculine tastelessness as a weapon against the complacent, feminine bourgeoisie. In the name of “guerrilla terrorism,” Tyler and his cronies take jobs as banquet waiters in order to defile the food they serve with various bodily excretions. It is in this context that the narrator undertakes his longest and strangest gazes at the male body. When Tyler exposes himself to urinate in a tureen of sweet tomato bisque, he instructs Joe, “Don’t look at me, or I can’t go.” But our protagonist cannot resist: “I say, hurry up, and I look back over my shoulder at Tyler with his last half inch hanging in the soup. This looks in a really funny way like a tall elephant in a waiter’s white shirt and bow tie drinking soup through its little trunk” (70). Joe is compelled to ogle his buddy’s penis, but the tincture of homoeroticism is deflected by Joe’s crass, puerile way of describing what he sees. As if to reinforce the significance of this move, Joe must perform a repetition only a few pages later: “The tomato soup must still be hot
because the crooked thing Tyler tucks back in his pants is boiled pink as a jumbo prawn” (76). Again he checks out Tyler’s penis, and again he denies its allure by turning it into a crude joke.

Palahniuk seems to participate in the general cultural trend of incorporating boldly homoerotic play into the performance of heterosexual masculinity. The pranks described in *Fight Club* are an early incarnation of the type of stunt made famous by *Jackass*, the long-running MTV show and progenitor of two feature films. The program features a gaggle of putatively straight young men who perform various dangerous acts of derring-do and, as the title suggests, generally behave like jackasses—*manly* jackasses. Yet their stunts, from which women are excluded, often involve the gang cavorting in thong underwear and otherwise exposing their genitals to one another. (Straight) men’s magazine *Maxim*, which traffics in glossies of semi-nude babes and articles on sports and video games, even listed the *Jackass* movies among its “Most Homoerotic Pop Culture Moments,” explaining, “Every time we looked up at the theater, the crew was shoving something up their asses or chugging animal semen” (Ulane). The type of sexual anxiety we may discern lurking behind these specifically male feats of heroism seems to pop up throughout Palahniuk’s novel. Take for example the homosocial camaraderie established when Joe tells Tyler with pride that, at a recent party he was working, “I got mine hard and stuck it in all their orange mousses” (71). It is as if the transgressive, sexually suggestive behavior Joe learned through and enacts with Tyler is enough to foment sexual excitement. Still, the novel refuses to swim openly against the currents of traditional masculinity.

This trend persists even as the book provides Joe with a male mother figure, of sorts, in the form of Big Bob. Joe first meets Bob in the support group Remaining Men Together, for victims of testicular cancer. As if his loss to the castrating disease were not enough, Big Bob
has developed “bitch tits” (in his own parlance) as a result of the hormone therapy following his surgery. And it is with Bob that Joe first experiences the catharsis that relieves his insomnia: “Bob’s big arms were closed around to hold me inside, and I was squeezed in the dark between Bob’s new sweating tits that hang enormous, the way we think of God’s as big” (6). In this feminine embrace, Joe can finally cry; for two years Bob hugs Joe, allowing him to weep and then sleep—“Babies don’t sleep this well” (12). That is until Marla, an actual woman, ruins everything when, ridiculously, she starts attending the testicular cancer meetings. In the novel’s clearest repudiation of women, Joe asserts, “What you see at fight club is a generation of men raised by women. . . . I’m a thirty-year-old-boy, and I’m wondering if another woman is really the answer I need” (41, 42). Yet if woman is dispensable, Big Bob suggests that femininity is not entirely. The motherly nurturing he provides is essential to Joe’s wellbeing before the Tyler era, and it is telling that his death (after joining fight club, Bob is shot by a policeman during a stunt) is what pushes Joe into active opposition against fight club. There is even a touch of homoeroticism in Joe’s relationship to Bob. Enveloped in his embrace, Bob begins to tell Joe his life story. “Strangers with this kind of honesty make me go a big rubbery one, if you know what I mean,” Joe responds (11). What does he mean? This comment seems to carry a sexual connotation, but it also shows yet again that the twinges of queerness in *Fight Club* are ambiguous. Of course, there remains in Joe’s statement the same type of childish glee with which the *Jackass* boys may identify in their homoerotic stunts.

When Joe asks Bob what he means by the word “huevos,” Bob replies, “Gonads. Nuts. Jewels. Testes. Balls. In Mexico, where you buy your steroids, they call them ‘eggs’” (11). If Bob represents emasculation and male femininity in his desire to nurture Joe, he may still claim his rightful manhood by speaking coarsely and performing heroic acts, like the one that killed him.
In the years since *Fight Club* was published, the heterosexualizing of homoeroticism has proceeded apace. We may draw a line from the genital showmanship of the novel to a current fad game among teens and coeds: “gay chicken.” A search of the term on YouTube yields thousands of hits, many of them linking to videos of young men engaged in the sport. Gay chicken is played between two ostensibly straight men—a gay player would be cheating, naturally—who proceed to lean in toward each other as if preparing to lock lips. The competitor to pull away first is the “loser.” The premise of gay chicken is always the same: the experience of a homosexual kiss is so offensive to the sensibility of a straight guy that simply possessing the gall to endure it is proof of masculine daring. It would appear that many men are willing to engage in several seconds of light foreplay with a same-sex pal in order to demonstrate their heterosexual manliness. And in an era of increasing tolerance of gays in America, especially among young people, gay chicken provides the bonus of allowing straights to rebuff both homophobia and homosexuality in a single turn. If what I have called Chuck Palahniuk’s postgay wink seems to be an uneven concept, it is because finally the wink is like a round of gay chicken. The whispers—and shouts—of homoerotic feeling in the book read like the author leaning in, preparing to deliver on the promise of a queer embrace. But before it is achieved, he retreats, pulling back with flights of fearless manhood and gross-out boyishness. Readers invested in the heterosexuality of characters that perform these deeds of heroism and debauchery are rewarded in the novel’s final pages, when Joe discovers that Tyler, the object of his possibly gay desire, is actually an alternate personality inhabiting his own psyche, and he comes to terms with his attraction to Marla. Palahniuk may attempt a wink at those progressive readers who can pick up on the latent gay material in the book and know not to give it too much weight, but he makes too many concessions to his presumed fan base (the
same demographic that enjoys *Jackass* and gay chicken) in upholding the inherently anti-gay tenets of American masculinity. Through the muddle, the author can finally only get across that most basic rule of postgayness: that sexuality is no longer a big deal—except when it is.

**WHO HISTORY DOESN’T TEACH, IT MAKES NUMB**

It will come as no surprise that *Fight Club*, with its themes of violence, terrorism, and devastating psychological discord, has a stake in exploring the effects of trauma. Indeed, the protagonist seems to be suffering from PTSD at the very start of the narrative. As a successful yuppie, Joe has a fabulous apartment and all the accoutrements of his social position—except friends, any real human connection. Immersed in the consumerist culture of 1990s economic prosperity, Joe’s every material desire is met and every spiritual need denied. Naturally, Joe begins to lose his mind. He develops insomnia, feels a pervasive emotional numbness—both symptoms of PTSD. Indeed, it is during this period that Joe’s mind first develops its dissociative identity disorder by creating Tyler; such behavior is usually an unconscious psychic response to catastrophic trauma. In the logic of the story, it is only the spiritual attenuation of contemporary culture that has brought on such a state. Once he starts fight club and quits his job, the manifestations of Joe’s disorder are almost totally channeled into one symptom: Tyler. And as a paragon of masculinity, hetero-seeming Tyler is the ideal dissociative symptom to be created by someone suffering from traumatized sexuality. He exhibits manly daring and aggression by initiating fight club, and proves his ambition and desire for status by transforming the organization into a powerful nationwide terrorist group, of which he is the messianic leader. He has sex with Marla, but repudiates femininity by otherwise treating her poorly and permitting women no place in his revolution. Finally, Tyler maintains an extreme aura of emotional detachment, showing no compunction about inflicting
pain and trauma in the pursuit of his goals. He demonstrates, to an overdetermined degree, all four pillars of masculinity as articulated by Robert Brannon above.

Even after Joe realizes that he and Tyler share a body, he refuses to see any of Tyler in himself: “I love everything about Tyler Durden, his courage and his smarts. His nerve. Tyler is funny and charming and forceful and independent, and men look up to him and expect him to change their world. Tyler is capable and free, and I am not” (165). Tyler the ur-heterosexual definitely has sex with women, and, by the end of the novel, Joe comes to think of that as the major reason for the alter ego’s very existence. “I know why Tyler had occurred,” Joe claims. “Tyler loved Marla. From the first night I met her, Tyler or some part of me had needed a way to be with Marla. . . . And if Tyler loves Marla. I love Marla” (189, 190). In a single gesture, Palahniuk sweeps away pages of homoerotic connotation. Forget the narrator’s intonation, “I am Joe’s Broken Heart because Tyler’s dumped me,” when he is abandoned for Project Mayhem (126). Forget Joe’s articulation of the triangle between Tyler, Marla, and himself, on page 4, in which he asserts, “I want Tyler.” Yet there is something strange at work in the sexual temporality of the book. Read cover to cover, the story chronicles Joe’s journey from failure to the achievement of heterosexual masculinity: Tyler represents his inadequacy, and Joe must defeat the alter ego by incorporating his better qualities, including desire for Marla. However, the story does not unfold linearly; it incorporates flashbacks and other indirect temporal devices—and not all the pieces of the timeline fit together logically. So although Joe explicitly “wants” Tyler and does not “want” Marla on page 4, and then realizes on page 190 that he really loves Marla, the events of page 4 actually take place after those recorded on page 190. Considered in its proper chronology, the first chapter presents a logical contradiction to Joe’s heterosexual epiphany in the novel’s final pages. When the scene in chapter 1 replays at
the end of the book, its homoerotic content is erased. It is as if the narration itself is suffering from PTSD. Even though chapters 1 and 29 inhabit the same temporal space, the assertion of queer desire is long gone by the novel’s conclusion, trapped in its early pages, from which our narrator cannot (or does not wish to) retrieve it. Thus Joe’s achievement of heterosexual masculinity is also a lapse into amnesia. (I should note, however, that Palahniuk does not allow Joe to enjoy his newfound straight masculinity. Immediately after Joe and Marla confirm their erotic longing for one another, Joe presumably suffers a total mental breakdown.)

At many points in _Fight Club_, the text itself (i.e., the narration) evinces traces of trauma. James Creech’s wink was a means of transmitting homosexual desire from the closet. I have tried to demonstrate that Chuck Palahniuk’s postgay wink is also a way of communicating homoerotic sentiment, although an ambivalent, dialectical one that arrives freighted with instructions to ignore it. _Fight Club_ also seems to demonstrate a wink-like relationship with AIDS. However, the book’s evocation of AIDS appears far more painful and bizarre than its engagement with homoeroticism. Instead of indicating desire and identity, the AIDS wink seems to gaze back in conflict at trauma of the past. Although references to the disease are obvious enough, their irruptive appearance and disconnectedness from the other aspects of the story suggest that Palahniuk is not entirely winking in these instances—the notion of AIDS seems also to trigger an involuntary spasm of fury, one that may appear to be a wink but is actually a sort of nictitant twitch. On two occasions in the novel, clear allusions to AIDS are brought up without naming the disease itself. In the first, Joe gives an account of going to his college’s medical school to have a wart removed from his penis (again Palahniuk draws our eyes _down there_). During the procedure, a medical student notices a red blotch on our protagonist’s foot. Soon the examining room is full of tittering students and doctors,
poking and photographing the foot of interest. When asked about it, our hero explains that the blotch is nothing more than a birthmark. “This is what I told them and it let all the air out of everything” (95). Left alone again with the one medical student, Joe asks for an explanation:

I said to the medical student, you must not see a lot of birthmarks around here. It’s not that. The student said everyone thought the birthmark was cancer. There was this new kind of cancer that was getting young men. They wake up with a red spot on their feet or ankles. The spots don’t go away, they spread until they cover you and then you die. The student said, the doctors and everyone were so excited because they thought you had this new cancer. Very few people had it, yet, but it was spreading. This was years and years ago. (96)

The new disease begins with a type of skin lesion—just as the first symptoms of AIDS involved the presence of the rare skin cancer Kaposi’s Sarcoma. Years and years ago it was thought to be a new type of cancer spreading rapidly among young men. This passage is a clear reference to AIDS. Yet AIDS is not mentioned, and Palahniuk includes the detail about a spreading red spot on the foot, not reminiscent of AIDS per se. He evokes AIDS and yet purposefully prevents the reader from placing the epidemic directly in the text. In chapter 2, I discussed James W. Jones’s essay “Refusing the Name,” in which he argues that gay writers of fiction may refer to AIDS in clear enough terms, but refrain from using the word AIDS, thereby troubling the prevailing logic that homosexuality = AIDS. Palahniuk, like Heim, does not use the word AIDS anywhere in his novel. But in Fight Club, unlike Mysterious Skin, there is no direct indication of homosexuality either. Instead there is the shadow of AIDS, but not AIDS; the shadow of gayness, but not gayness. As such, the account is without any power to break down assumptions about disease and homosexuality. In effect, what Joe experiences is a close call with AIDS and homosexuality, narrowly escaping both (because the two remain implicitly synonymous in the text). Even though Joe claims to have avoided the traumatic experience of disease, his experience at the medical school itself figures as a kind of trauma. For one thing,
the initial telling of the experience is as a flashback, which already suggests traumatic repetition. But then Joe explains that the anxiety he experienced during that incident recurs again and again: “Me, when I go to the beach, I always sit with my right foot tucked under me... or I keep it buried in the sand. My fear is that people will see my foot and I’ll start to die in their minds. The cancer I don’t have is everywhere now” (97). It is telling that his fear of AIDS/homosexuality always comes out at the beach, the same setting in which Joe meets Tyler and the narration suppresses its own homoerotic potential. When Joe hides his birthmark in the sand, he is also burying the possibility of his homosexuality. Ultimately Palahniuk seems to suggest that the trauma resulting from AIDS continues to haunt, but from a postgay space, there is no way of providing an activist intervention.

_Fight Club_’s second (and last) allusion to AIDS also brings the novel’s only direct reference to homosexuality. Joe tells of Marla’s experience at a free clinic, where she encountered

slumped scarecrow mothers... with limp doll children balled in their laps or lying at their feet. The children were sunken and dark around their eyes the way oranges or bananas go bad and collapse, and the mothers scratched at mats of dandruff from scalp yeast infections out of control. The way the teeth in the clinic looked huge in everyone’s thin face, you saw how teeth are just shards of bone that come through your skin to grind things up... Before anyone knew any better, a lot of gay guys had wanted children, and now the children are sick and the mothers are dying and the fathers are dead... (99)

In this instance of the nictitant twitch, all the terrible, stigmatizing rhetoric that vilified gay men in the wake of AIDS bubbles up in a flash. Although the word AIDS is not mentioned in this passage either, it is clear that the disease under discussion, because of its association with homosexuality, is literally AIDS, and not a stand-in with many striking similarities. The passage’s vivid evocation of ruin brought upon women and children as the direct result of homosexual men is reminiscent of the trend Lee Edelman elucidates in _No Future_. He outlines
a dimension of homophobia whereby our culture continually portrays gay men as the undoing of the normative family—literally the killers of innocent women and children! Because the image of the child represents the future, (male) homosexuality is seen to bring about the total collapse of civilization. Indeed, as Edelman points out, organizations like the American Family Association venomously denounce homosexuality in the name of protecting the children and securing the future of human society (16). As such, the one direct reference to gay men in *Fight Club* may be viewed as another irruption of popular culture in the narrative voice, another reminder of the unavoidable stigma attached to queerness. This may explain why the small bit of horror pops up apropos of nothing and serves no purpose in plot advancement or character development. It appears instead as symptom of trauma, the return of the repressed.

At the end of the book, perhaps like an AIDS patient near the end of his life, Joe succumbs to dementia. He is confined to a mental hospital and is so far gone that he believes he has died, his doctor is God, and his nurses are angels. Still, he comes to an oddly balanced resolution: “I look at God behind his desk, taking notes on a pad, but God’s got this all wrong. We are not special. We are not crap or trash, either. We just are. We just are, and what happens just happens” (198). Joe seems to have become a caricature representing everything bad about postgayness. He is haunted by the past, but paralyzed by numbness; powerless, but content. And all he wants is to leave the past behind and embrace a future in which people finally get that “we are not special.” Palahniuk may seem to call for a new era in which sexual identity is no longer important and AIDS is over and done with, but he also evinces ambivalence in the final chapter as to whether this is possible. In spite of having achieved hetero-masculinity by defeating Tyler and embracing Marla, Joe has no wish to step into his new role as a “real man.” When he pulls the trigger and blasts a hole in his cheek, Joe blows away the extreme and
negative masculinity represented by Tyler as well as the last traces of his emasculated (and possibly gay) identity, which had created Tyler as a corrective to itself. What should have resulted in a happy medium, the best of what a man should be in the postgay era (i.e., neither homophobic nor homosexual), ends in a seeming annihilation of identity. Indeed, Palahniuk seems to suggest that middle-ground state of being is impossible. Joe wants to get away from homosexuality and avoid all the stigma and trauma it denotes, but he cannot take the final step into hetero-masculinity, which now seems like a menace, in the form of beat-up orderlies who tell Joe, “We miss you Mr. Durden” and “Everything’s going according to the plan” (199). Tyler’s plan, if we remember back to chapter 1, is to destroy history. “This is our world, now, our world,” Tyler says, “and those ancient people are dead” (4). But for all of the trauma surrounding homosexuality and AIDS, the past refuses to be dismantled. Postgay postures may eschew the exclusivity of insight of older gay meta-narratives, but the ancestors will not be swept away.
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