

8 Queer Memory and the Brown Commons

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Queer Temporality, Queer Memory

Whatever else it is, queer *is* a way of being in time, in history, in memory. The confrontation with the past has been a central concern in the study of queer temporalities. Latent in queer critique from the beginning, it became central in the mid-2000s and remains so today. It is easy to attribute this critical declension to the way old and, especially, new media have made the past available at an unprecedented scale and degree of sensuous immersiveness. Digital networks in particular, thanks to their capabilities for practically unlimited storage and instant retrieval, made more of the past more immediately accessible than it had ever been when contact with it required physical displacement and the handling of archival materials, experiences that demanded considerable expense of time and means. Traces and images of former times, from personal photo archives to institutional repositories, are now immediately retrievable from our computers. And being readily at hand, they are also endlessly available for rewriting and recycling, since graphic design software and user-friendly editing tools allow for their easy manipulation and reconfiguration. It is in part this manipulability, which permits the scrambling of temporal lines and encourages endless historical revision, that makes the past a process and a problem rather than a given; a coordinate of experience that demands to be thought rather than taken for granted. In addition, queer backward glances may be encouraged by the uneven fate of sexual liberation half a century after its inception. The ideal of a forward-moving history of emancipation that fueled sexual liberation movements in the seventies and early eighties crashed, first, against the institutionalized homophobia unleashed by AIDS and, more recently, against the numerous efforts to revert hard-earned queer and minority rights even in countries that had pioneered their recognition. In the absence of an overarching historical project and of emancipatory guarantees that might signpost a lineal advance for queer minorities, creators, critics, and historians dip into the past for compensatory utopias and for clues to understanding and living in the present. Even stories of obstruction, hostility, aggression, and impossibility can

help us to navigate a beleaguered present and suggest strategies of resistance and endurance.

Whether compensatory or prospective, the backward glance is not particular to queers alone. Pierre Nora has claimed that collective memory is all the more carefully cultivated by minorities whose past is either unrecognized or, at worst, forcibly erased by normative accounts (1989, 11). Queers in particular—read subalterns of all stripes—have been frequently wiped out from the record or consigned to it only as outlaws or aberrations. And they have had a conflictive relation to normative time. As Elisabeth Freeman writes, they have been typically described as “temporally backward, though paradoxically dislocated from any specific historical period,” and perhaps because of their aslant rapport to time, they have “lacked history as a distinct people” (Freeman 2007, 162). But precisely the lack of an institutionalized past, Freeman continues, affords queers considerable latitude in reading its signs and encourages a backward glance unhindered by tradition or official constraint.

This lack of constraint comes through forcefully in the round table discussion Freeman herself curated for the “Queer Temporalities” special issue of *GLQ* in 2007 (Dinshaw et al. 2007). The exchange among the participants—Christopher Nealon, Roderick Ferguson, Annemarie Jagose, Caroline Dinshaw, Jack Halberstam, Nguyen Tan Hoang, and Carol Freccero, all of whom had recently published work or had curated film and video programs with a strong temporal inflection—had at the time the character of a state of the art and remains today an encapsulation of many of the main motifs in the study of queer temporalities, including queer approaches to the past. Common to the different interventions on the queer past—and to the work that they reference—is a deliberate avoidance of standard historical research. While the historicist approach carried out in other areas of the field was interested in the elucidation of the shifting paradigms of gender and sexuality across time, chronology, periodization, and empirical documentation, the work of the participants in the round table regarded the past instead as a reservoir of images and affects in dialogue with the present. In the fashion of Walter Benjamin’s experimental historical method—cited in passing by Ferguson—the past purveys dialectal images that could be wrenched out of chronology in order to illuminate a queer now, or, as Dinshaw put it in *Getting Medieval*, in order “to extend resources for self or community building” (1999, x). The interest in the past was based on what Dinshaw named “a queer desire for history” (Dinshaw et al. 2007, 178) and Christopher Nealon described as a search for “sodality” and “belonging across time” (2001, 2). Repeated tropes for this search, both in the round table discussion itself and in the work of its participants, were “tactile” appropriation (Dinshaw 1999; Dinshaw et al. 2007), identification and affective contact (Nealon 2001; Dinshaw et al. 2007), spectrality (Freccero 2006), re-use (Nealon 2001), and embodiment, as in the practice of what Freeman called *erotohistoriography*—the use of

the body “as a tool to effect, figure or perform” the encounter with the past (2010, 95).

Clearly, this was not standard historical research. It was carried out, in fact, by literary and cultural critics, and was often questioned by historicists as impressionistic, speculative, and based on analogical thinking rather than on data mining (Traub 2013). The criticism was somewhat misguided because neither conventional empirical research nor the production of standard genealogies were the goals of these thinkers, who questioned, in different ways, that normative history was the only valid methodology to make sense of the past. Rather than clarify evolution, delineate timelines, or demarcate periods, their research yielded isolated intensities and pregnant moments in which the past became conversant with the present or illuminated it in different ways. Their tentative, piecemeal approach was appropriate to the discontinuous character of queer culture, which offers less a fully traceable record than an intermittent, fragmented archive of feelings and affects (Cvetkovich 2003; Nealon 2001); of ephemera (Muñoz 1996); or of the seemingly inconsequential, low-grade, cheap, mass produced, improvised, and coincidental—that is, the “tiny archives” (Halberstam 2008, 151) that might go unnoticed for those not attuned to the semiotics of sexual outlaws.

Joan Doan differentiated this work from that of historians by ascribing to it the rubric of memory studies, a well-established field that neither in its canonical instantiations (by Maurice Halbwachs or Pierre Nora, for example) nor in its more recent developments has broached the memory of sexual minorities but that has some similarities with queer un-historicism (Doan 2017, 114–15). Often defined against traditional history (Le Goff 1992; Tumblety 2013), memory studies is not interested in capturing the past but in exploring how it survives and is appropriated in the present. Memory connotes more casual, personalized, locally grounded forms of recollection, while “history” evokes totality—no matter how erased or bracketed—and completeness. In addition, “memory” may be individual or collective and therefore points at the permeation of the subjective imaginary by the collective archive. In fact, one of Halbwachs’s distinctive contributions was to underline the structuring role of memory’s social frameworks—the communal schemata without which no remembering is possible (1992, 52–53). Memory is less invested in the (dis)continuities and causal relations that are the object of history than in the selective and fragmentary activation of the past. And it is not focused on accuracy but in use. Since memory is never a mere retrieval of pre-existing content, it always entails reconstruction, interpretation, and mobilization in particular contexts and for given purposes, and consequently involves an ethics and a politics of reading.

“Use” makes memory acts heterogeneous and palimpsestic, subject to various temporalities: of the past, of the present that orients the backward glance, and of a lineage of previous recollections that may intervene between both and could exert their own gravitational pull as points of attraction and

repulsion. Unlike history, which is biased towards documented factuality, memory is embodied and involves corporeal recall. It is, Alison Landsberg claims, “a sensuous phenomenon experienced by the body and derives much of its power through affect” (2004, 9). It involves a bodily archive, traces of sensation and arousal. In its sensuous, affective registers, memory may have what Sedgwick (2003, 123–53) called a “reparative” function: it may be additive and curative, as Freeman hoped for her erotohistoriography. But it may also have a critical effect. It may undermine the presumed certainties of the present, revealing its contingency, and it may be an antidote against what Schulman called “the gentrification of the mind” (2012) and Giroux “the violence of organized forgetting” (2014).

While memory is most often understood as a mental, and therefore immaterial, image, memory studies claims that memory is also material, since concrete objects and locations act as place-holders for former experience—*lieux de memoire*, in Pierre Nora’s classic term. In fact, memory is lost when its material pointers and anchors disappear. Memory is also mobile and transferable: against the proprietary concept of memory “owned” by the subjects or communities that have experienced a particular past, memory can be adopted against the grain of one’s identity and history and may affect by proxy—a quality that has been explored in some of the most provocative contributions to the field. Marianne Hirsch has shown that traumatic memory travels across generations in what she calls post-memory—“distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection” (1992, 9). The memory of the Holocaust, her main object of research, affects not only those who were direct recipients of its violence but also their descendants, who may have only experienced it only through family accounts and mementos. But it also prompts strong lateral identifications among those without family or ethnic connection to it. This is what Michael Rothberg has described as the “multidirectional” character of memory—its ability to reach across geographical and cultural divides and be woven into different collective imaginaries (2009, 7–12). Rothberg has studied in particular how “memory of the Nazi genocide and struggles for decolonization have persistently broken the frame of the nation-state” since the early postwar years (2009, 20). The development of the collective memory of the Holocaust unfolded in an intense dialogue with processes of decolonization and mobilization for civil rights, dialogues in which both sets of experiences served to map each other while understanding their distinctness (Rothberg 2009, 23). Cross-generational transmission and multi-directionality corroborate what Allison Landsberg called the “prosthetic character” of memory, which, “like an artificial limb” can be “worn on the body” and enter individual and collective ecologies of emotion and affect (2004, 20–21). This possibility rests on the ever present media feed; it supplies a constant stream of “privately felt public memories” that function as “transference spaces” (Landsberg 2004, 24, 21). They can be multiply cathected as locations of projection, identification, longing, and desire. The “hypertrophy of memory”

that Andreas Huyssen has detected in the present is always heavily mass mediated (2003, 3).

The portability of memory detaches the past from lineage, location, or identity and turns into a floating sign up for grabs. While this has raised concerns about its trivialization, overexposure, inauthenticity, and commodification, it also increases the opportunities for cross-cultural and cross-communal solidarity, for political alliances, and for the generalized scrambling of identity that is at the heart of queer being. Hence the “desire for history” that Dinshaw associated with queerness is not filial but multidirectional. It is not a desire for “direct” ancestors, which in the case of queers means those most recognizably like us, but for different forms of kinship underpinned by identification, a sense of shared marginality, and similar histories of suppression and resistance against it. Joan Nestle borrows the language of anti-colonial resistance to explain the origins of the Lesbian Herstory Archive in the 1970s as “an anti-colonizing project” based on a broad conception of lesbianism that encapsulated “all possibilities of queerness” and “all possibilities of deviations” (2022, 353). In the midst of the AIDS epidemic, Gran Fury appropriated the pink triangle, which had marked male homosexuals in nazi concentration camps, in order to underline the structural similarity between two stigmatized communities. Butch lesbian culture has long incorporated the marks of post-war working class masculinity and rebel youth. And camp aesthetics, to cite one more example, plunders the past in search of excessive styles and idiosyncratic corporealities. These cross-identifications are not based solely on sexual marginality but on a felt analogy in social positioning. In all these cases, looking backward involves, to borrow Elizabeth Freeman’s words, discovering “affective narratives of human belonging where life forms, although porous to one another, do not seem exchangeable through a third term of equivalence, such as sexual identity” (2007, 164).

The Brown Memory Commons

Freeman’s “porous life forms” are human entities, which subtend as well all other conceptualizations of memory we have just surveyed. In all these conceptions, memory is funneled through human bodies—whether individual or collective and communal—that act as agents of recollection and memory repositories. It seems, in the face of this theorizing, as if a body were needed as a receptacle for the past or as its activator—the surface on which prosthetic pasts, post-memories, and affective encounters can be recorded and made visible. Without a body to reduce events to some sort of delineation, some kind of plot, time offers only a scattering of incidental actualities. Hence, the body is memory’s binding agent; it gathers dispersed facts into a continuity of sequence and purpose. And memory in turn binds the body’s sensorial dispersion into an illusion of completeness and coherence across time. The underlying assumption then is that we remember because we have bodies that capture time’s dispersive flow, and we have a body because we

remember—because we can conjure the temporal lifeline of the flesh we inhabit.

But what happens when bodies dissolve? Who or what remembers when it is no longer possible to limit the corporeal to the boundary of the skin? When memory, along with other forms of consciousness, ceases to be a prerogative of human bodies and is distributed across other supports? This is more and more the case in our post-human, trans-corporeal world. We, carbon-based soft machines, are now inextricably connected to silicon-based technological devices, and thinking and remembering constantly involve, in Andrew Hoskins and Anne Reading's words, "participation with inorganic structures" (2009, 7). Bodies are, to cite Paul B. Preciado, "telebodies"—immediately configured for transmission across digital devices and styled for "telepresence" via Snapchat or TikTok, for example (2022, 308–9). What configurations does memory take in this world? What remembers when thinking and remembering take place on a continuum of neural pathways and nervous impulses hooked to keyboards, screens, microprocessors, memory units, and modems? When lives are deposited in blogs, websites, and digital archives and are downloadable, re-combinable, and immediately editable? How to rethink memory when it is no longer a faculty of organic bodies? Technology remembers more and better than we do, as it is able to recombine vast data repositories into coherent textual streams. Generative AI programs recall and process what we may have never read, what we may not need to know any more. Software programs automatically search our personal image banks, collate our images into personal albums, and even add a soundtrack. Whose memories are these? Perhaps in time this is what we will end up remembering and our intimate past will be, if not irretrievable, at least decisively colored by these interventions from the outside. Except, when external technological mediation becomes so intricately woven into the fabric of our memories, everything is *outside*—or nothing is. We live, think, and recall along what Mark Fisher called "the flatline," where it is no longer possible to distinguish inside from outside, animate from inanimate, organic from inorganic, natural from artificial (Fisher 2018, 2). All these dualities are deeply embedded into each other, and the passage across them is a matter of scale and intensity, not of qualitative difference. On the flatline, agency is not exclusive to carbon corporeality, and thought and memory take place in extended innervated fields crossed by information and affect, fields where humans are a type of node in a mesh that also connects the animal, the vegetal, the technological, and the material.

Feminism and queer critique have incorporated into their conceptual repertoires these expanded understandings of corporeality, being, and consciousness. For material feminist Stacy Alaimo for example, bodies cannot be separated from their material contexts; we now inhabit the "trans-corporeal": "the time-space where human corporeality in all its material fleshiness is inseparable from nature or environment" (Alaimo 2008, 238). Bodies and material environment are inseparable not only because they are

mutually interconnected in elemental life processes, but also because the environment is an active, creative interlocutor in its own right. Drawing on expanded notions of writing and remembering, Vicky Kirby claims that “biology is as actively literate, numerate, and inventive as anything we may want to include in culture.” Biological material, she continues, “writes, calculates, fabricates . . . invents, transforms, crafts, redistributes, incorporates, and bequeaths” (Kirby 2011, 83–84). Siding with Kirby’s conception of a literate, writerly nature, Elisabeth Grosz (2011), Donna Haraway (2016), and Jack Halberstam (2020) have regarded, in their different ways, the natural world as a laboratory for the reinvention of human and transspecies corporeality, sexuality, and relationality; a source of antinormative models of being, non-hierarchical sexualities, and unprecedented political symbionts. The possibilities opened by the interlocation between culture and nature, the natural and the inorganic led José Muñoz to envision, in his late work, a “brown commons” made up of the human and non-human. Here “brown” is an inclusive rubric that encompasses experiences of subalternity and exposure; it “indexes a certain vulnerability to the violence of property, finance, and to capital’s overarching mechanisms of domination” (Muñoz 2020, 3). The brown commons includes “feelings, sounds, buildings, neighborhoods, environments, and the nonhuman organic life that might circulate in such an environment alongside humans, and the inorganic presences that life is very often so attached to” (Muñoz 2020, 2–3). This is a queer ecology, a commonality of human and non-human collectivities under siege. They are joined by a shared experience of harm but also by a common cultivation of contraband knowledges, a capacity for joy, and strategies of resistance and endurance.

The brown commons is also a memory commons—a collective recall of communal vulnerability and subjection, but also of insurrectionary bursts and joyous escape routes. Human bodies and communities, of course, have their own memories, but so do objects and materials, the earth, companion species, and the vegetable mass. Architecture provides shelter but also placeholders for the past. There is a memory of place and the environment as much as a memory of the nerves, bones, skin, and the sensibility. Retroaction and the reshuffling of the marks of the past is constant and intertwined in this compound commons in which affect-laden backward glances and retrospective touches are not channeled exclusively through the human but also through distributed systems that implicate the natural and the material in all their facets. How do these trans-corporeal queer commons remember? What grammars of memory do justice to their interwoven complexity?

A possible model is Gilles Deleuze’s description of systems in *Difference and Repetition* (1994 [1968]). Written at a time when Structuralism and cybernetics were still in vogue, it implicitly contests many of their tenets. Against the understanding of systems as homeostatic and tending towards stability and entropy, Deleuze’s systems are open-ended and irregular, an idea inspired by highly dynamic biological and natural processes, such as the ones that Gilbert Simondon described under the rubric of individuation. Systems

are, for Deleuze, series of elements in interaction. The series that participate in a system are connected by what he calls “*a dark precursor*,” an element that does not belong to any of them but puts them in touch and makes them resonate against each other ([1968] 1994, 116–17). The resonance itself is the system, which is not rule-driven—rules are postulated in an attempt to manage and explain its diversity—but a constant unfolding of difference against itself:

Once communication between heterogeneous series is established, all sorts of consequences follow within the system. . . . Spatio-temporal dynamisms fill the system, expressing simultaneously the resonance of the coupled series and the amplitude of the forced movement which exceeds them.

(118)

Only retroactively can the system be given a stable contour, or, in Deleuze’s formulation, be read as a representation, often under the figures of identity or subjectivity. “The system is populated by subjects, both larval subjects and passive selves: passive selves because they are indistinguishable from the contemplation of couplings and resonances; larval subjects because they are the supports or the patients of the dynamisms” (118).

The brown memory commons is a Deleuzian system: a convergence of heterogeneous mnemonic series—fragments of past imaginaries—whose elements differ from each other internally (within each of the series) and resonate externally (across series). Dark precursors create promiscuous alliances and unpredictable linkages between the different series. Deleuze cites Sigmund Freud’s notion of retroaction or delayed effect (*Nachträglichkeit*) as an example: the activation of an early memory (often infantile and pre-genital) by a later (post-puberal) experience ([1968] 1994, 124). Early memory and subsequent experience belong to different temporal series that are brought fortuitously in contact and resonate against each other through the dark precursor. But Deleuze crucially nuances Freud’s formula. Rather than consider the series as successive—childhood an originating point and adulthood its derivation—he emphasizes their coexistence in the unconscious. The childhood memory that becomes reactivated—usually an unassimilated experience, a traumatic occurrence, or an undischarged excitation—is not previous and original, but simultaneous with its contemporary reactivation. It may not even be literally located in childhood but could be *any* experience of vulnerability that provokes a rifling through memory in search of handles on the present and aids to thought. The excessive, traumatic, or undischarged excitation is the dark precursor that triggers resonances across temporal series. But this resonance is not at the service of an individual subject or a distinct community for which memory is a form of property or a mark of identity. For Deleuze, resonance takes place in an *intersubjective* unconscious inserted in a queer ecology of remembrance. It is part of a trans-corporeal brown commons, collaborative, contagious, distributed, material, and reticulate.

Queer Grammars of Remembrance

Glimpses of this new grammar of memory can be seen in the work of non-mainstream queer creators belonging to a variety of collectives with no stakes in a traditional, orderly history or in institutionalized pasts (ethnic, migrant, diasporic, crip, immunocompromised, trans, neurodiverse . . .). These creators cultivate “minor,” eccentric forms—multi-media and multi-generic work, non-chronological narrative modes, fragmentary texts, experimental styles—and take advantage of memory’s mobility, instability, and multidirectionality to envision new forms of collectivity and being.

An example is Shu Lea Cheang’s installation *3x3x6* (2019). Born in Taiwan but based in the US and Paris for most of her artistic career, Shu Lea Cheang has made conventional film and web art—she is a pioneer in the form—and installations. She became quite noted for *I.K.U.* (2001), a post-porn cyberpunk sci-fi feature film, and for her website *Brandon* (1998–99), the first web art project commissioned by the Guggenheim Museum, named after, and devoted to, Brandon Teena, a trans man raped and killed in Nebraska in the mid-nineties who was also the subject of the mainstream film *Boys Don’t Cry* (dir. Kimberly Pierce 1999).

3x3x6 was part of the Taiwan Pavilion at the 2019 Venice Biennale. It was housed at the Palazzo delle Prigioni in Venice, a former jail that had held illustrious sexual offenders such as serial seducer Giacomo Casanova, who actually managed to break out. The show can be seen as a convergence of several memory series channeled through different technological and material supports. It was inspired by ten cases of imprisonment “due to gender and sexual non-conformity,” as the official web site of Pavilion states, and sought to explore the visual regimes used to survey sexuality and enforce orthodoxy since modernity (Taiwan in Venice 2019). It combined projected video (some uploaded by anonymous users), an interactive website, a facial recognition system that captured and deformed visitors’ faces and then projected them on a screen, and the palace itself, a gigantic *objet trouvé* that had considerable protagonism, since it was the trigger for the show. In a way, the show is the palace’s expanded memory series: some are direct, as the memory of Casanova’s brief tenancy, and others are prosthetic—the memories of other offenders who were never there, but are annexed to the memory of the building through video projection (de Sade, Foucault—who was occasionally investigated for his sexual activities—and other anonymous characters arrested for soliciting chem sex, cross-dressing, or for other non-normative sexual practices). There is in addition a technological memory series; as the show’s curator Paul B. Preciado has pointed out, the installation reflects on the evolution from disciplinary confinement (the old-fashioned prison, with its thick walls, heavily barred windows, and cell division) to contemporary digital surveillance techniques, which are subtler but no less implacable (Vernissage TV 2019). This particular series emphasizes at once the progressively immaterial character of surveillance—visitors are inadvertently captured by hidden digital cameras as

they walk in—but also its spectacular potential, as the last room is occupied by the hardware that held the show together, presented as a work of art in its own right. The installation brings together a number of memory streams that resonate through structures of control and surveillance—the dark precursor through which they relate to each other. They emanate from the materiality of the building but range beyond it and are dispersed across a broad technological continuum. These memories are often speculative and hallucinatory. De Sade, Foucault, and Casanova are cast against ethnicity and gender: performance artist Liz Rosenfeld, for example, embodies De Sade, while Taiwanese dancer Enrico Way plays Casanova. It is a way to hack gender and race, Preciado pointed out, but also, one could add, to globalize sexual rebellion, too often affixed to white Western bodies. Some of the contemporary case studies are actually from Taiwan. The memory commons recreated here is not personalized or subjectivized, but collective, cross-genre, transmedia, transgenerational, cross-ethnic, and cross-genre. It is a memory system that does not belong to anyone or anywhere in particular, but is up for grabs as we retool and rethink our bodies and behaviors today.

Jenni Olson's *Joy of Life* (2005) is another outstanding example of distributed recollection and of an intersubjective, transcorporeal memory commons. A noted archivist, programmer, film critic, and filmmaker, Olson has authored volumes such as *The Queer Movie Poster Book* (2004) and *The Ultimate Guide to Lesbian and Gay Film and Video* (1996) and compilation films such as *Homo Promo*, *Afro Promo*, and *Bride of Trailer Camp*, among others—collections of gay and lesbian film previews. These titles were frequently screened at lesbian and gay film festivals through the 1990s and early 2000s. Olson has also directed a number of experimental shorts that have had relatively small circulation and several feature films. One of these is *The Joy of Life* (2005), a hybrid of erotic memoir, urban history, and essayistic reflection about sex, death, urban modernity, and architecture. An anonymous off-screen voice recounts several episodes of a lesbian erotic memoir. The sexual escapades, described in lush detail, are interspersed with reflections about sexuality, desire, attraction, and the raconteur's inability to commit to a single relationship. The second part of the film narrates the apparently unrelated story of the Golden Gate Bridge as a major magnet for suicides. It summarizes the history of the bridge's design and construction, the concerns of designers and the port authority about the safety features of the bridge, and the way in which the attempt to keep construction costs as low as possible resulted in the dangerously low barriers flanking the pedestrian walkway.

Eventually the story modulates into what turns out to be Olson's personal reminiscence about her friend Mark Finch: a critic, programmer, media activist, and festival organizer. Finch had been one of the creators of the London Gay and Lesbian Film Festival in 1988. After moving to San Francisco at the end of the decade, he would co-direct, with Olson, the San Francisco Lesbian and Gay Film Festival from 1992 to 1994 (Olson 2020). Often energetic and

creative, Finch was also severely afflicted by depression and ended up taking his own life by jumping from the bridge. A line connects the history of a landmark, corrupt city politics, cost-cutting at the expense of public safety, and the life of a particular individual dear to the filmmaker. A series about the past of a landmark is caught in the labyrinthine web of vested interests, power struggles, and capital flows that drive the life of institutions—another



Figure 8.1 Jenni Olson, *The Joy of Life* (2005).

Source: Courtesy of Jenni Olson.



Figure 8.2 Jenni Olson, *The Joy of Life* (2005).

Source: Courtesy of Jenni Olson.

series—and resonates with a biographical series that contains an archive of mental fragility, depression, and death.

Mark Finch's biographical series emanates from the circumstances of Olson's life, but the film does not identify them as such. The voice remains anonymous, and neither the reminiscences about him and his death nor the erotic memoir are marked as anyone's in particular. They are accounts into which spectators dip, much as one crosses a square or a landscape, to become immersed momentarily in its light and atmosphere. In fact, both memory series are void of faces and identifiable bodies. Voice-overs are matched to depopulated city views that seldom bank on San Francisco's picturesqueness and showcase instead ordinary alleys, sidewalks, buildings, walls, trees swaying in the breeze. Lacking explicit personal reference, the personal memory series float free and resonate with the others without appealing to an individual's idiosyncrasy or biography. They emanate from their setting: San Francisco as a fabled queer mecca and sexual haven but also as a place where one's best intentions are thwarted—a noir city with a sinister underbelly, as recorded, for example, in Dashiell Hammett's early novels and short stories of the 1920s and 1930s. Another effect of these free-floating memories is their dialectical imbrication: sex and death stand side by side, intricately connected. *The Joy of Life*, the title of the film, marks the imperative to take from time as much as possible in view of the precarity and vulnerability that haunts all being.

In Wu Tsang's film *Wildness* (2012), memory has a similar atmospheric quality. It is equally dispersed but also anchored in bodies and location. It makes ample use of first-person testimony; even the film's primary setting, a queer bar in Los Angeles, remembers and speaks. The bar's voice is in fact the film's narrator. Together the film's voices compose a choral memory that belongs, once again, to all and to no one in particular. The film has been brilliantly discussed by José Muñoz (2020, 134–40) as an example of the brown commons but not so much as a text about memory—what I am calling a brown memory commons. *Wildness* is a mixture of memory and documentary about a club night of the same name that Wu Tsang ran for several years at the Silver Platter, a Los Angeles queer bar that had been in operation since the early 1960s. The Silver Platter was traditionally frequented by working-class Latino gay men, drag queens, and trans women, many of them illegal immigrants, many escaping from unlivable situations in their places of origin. It hosted drag shows and Latino dances until Tsang stumbled upon it by chance and decided to hold a club night—"Wildness"—on a weekday when clientele seemed to flag. Starting as a dance night, it also ended up hosting alternative theater, performance, and concerts of experimental music, along with occasional evenings for Latino music in recognition of the roots of the place. "Wildness" brought into the Silver Platter younger queers from the worlds of alternative music, art, performance, and the creative professions—a very different demographic from the bar's regulars. In the film, the traditional clients speak of the wonderful merger of the two constituencies—arty

hipsterdom and working-class queers. The relation grows so close that Tsang jumps from club night host to community activist for a time and tries to set up a legal counsel office for the many immigrants in the orbit of the bar who needed to regularize their situation. Eventually, though, the bar closes due to a feud between its owners, two brothers who cannot agree on how to keep running the place.

The film is a postmortem of the eponymous club night and the Silver Platter. It is in many ways a conventional documentary with abundant talking heads filmed on site, factual footage, and props. Among these are the handbills and posters used to advertise theme parties, concerts, performances, and special events. The scattered materiality of printed paper recalls the material supports of memory, the way it is inscribed not only on the neural engrams but on a material continuum that exceeds and surrounds the body. Memory is further materialized in the fact that the venue itself remembers and forms its own series. A Spanish-speaking Latino voice winds its way through the film: the voice of the bar itself remembering the good and the bad times, the great nights and the acrimonious family dispute that led to its closing. Other series belong to the different customers, usually shown in their drag regalia, who tell a story—often subtly hinted—of forced migration due to poverty or persecution. The film offers a distributed act of recall, detoured through a sprawling body of uncertain limits: customers, drag performers, Tsang's own accounts, the bar itself, the mute paper trail, with its precise notation of dates and times. Other series converge here. Muñoz notes that Jennie Livingstone's documentary of ball culture in New York, *Paris Is Burning* (1990), resides very explicitly in the memory of *Wildness*, and so does, if more unconsciously, Latina activist Sylvia Rivera and the collective she co-founded, with Marsha P. Johnson, in the early seventies: STAR (Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries). In addition, *Wildness* also captures a brief segment of Los Angeles urban history, with its changing neighborhoods, spreading gentrification, population shifts, and the constant struggle of minorities to find spaces for non-normative communities and pursuits. A further series is the deep historical wound that cuts through the migrant bodies: a memory of collective displacement and dispossession. Dire inequality and imperialism keep the south impoverished and make Los Angeles (the United States at large) a destination for migrants from the Global South. The film stages a memory that is psychic and material, individual and collective, and cuts across classes, ethnicities, and social worlds; it involves a variety of subjects and collectives without attaching to any in particular. Vulnerability and homelessness travel across these series, making them resonate and giving the film its particular coloration as a combination of nostalgia for the lapsed utopia of the bar and a sense of empowerment at the thought that what once was can be reconstructed elsewhere.

The memory of place features prominently in *3x3x6*, *The Joy of Life*, and *Wildness*. By contrast, my last example, *Touching Blues* (2021), a film by Catalan choreographer Aimar Pérez Galí, takes place in an abstract space: a

delimited blue square—its borders are constantly visible in the frame—captured from above in what seems a single static take. On this stage, five men perform a slow, meditative choreography during which their bodies come together in intricate figures of intimacy, care, and sensual connection. Other settings are evoked acoustically by several off-screen voices that reflect about the AIDS epidemic, death, and dance. They read fragments by art and dance theorists Estrella de Diego and André Lepacki and by US AIDS activist Jon Greenberg and letters, written by Pérez Galí, to dancers who died from AIDS-related illnesses during the iron years of the epidemic. A final letter is addressed to artist and performer Lorenza Böttner, another casualty of the epidemic whose work was being recovered while the film was in preproduction.

The film is part of a larger project that includes as well the choreography *The Touching Community* (2016), which is reprised in the film, and the volume *Lo Tocante* (2018), which gathers all the letters that Pérez-Galí wrote



Figure 8.3 Aimar Pérez Galí, *Touching Blues* (2021).

Source: Image: Lluís Bullón. Courtesy of Aimar Pérez Galí.

to the absent dance community along with several commissioned essays and an interview with Uruguayan activist Diego Sempol. The project is an homage to a world that suffered disproportionately from the impact of the epidemic. While the dance and the letter-writing were initially inspired by Pérez Galís discovery of the work of the late John Bernd, a New York-based dancer known for candid autobiographical works, such as *Surviving Love and Death* (1986), the bulk of the letters are addressed to Spanish and Latin American dancers, a community that has been less documented than their North American and North European counterparts.

The film—the entire project in fact—is another example of the memory commons—an intersubjective, de-localized retrospection that exceeds singular selves and self-enclosed communities and stretches also across the material and non-human. The film is triggered by a memory trace—a photograph of John Bernd in a volume on dance—and by an absence: Pérez Galís absence from a scene that began to unravel as he came into the world in 1982, when the epidemic was making its way across the world. His way to relive and homage this scene is by navigating its living memory through encounters, interviews, video calls, and emails with the survivors. The resulting letters capture this absent world. They are at once a biographical memory of his own search, which takes him all over Latin America, and a group memory of those who cannot write back, but whose lives still stir in Pérez Galís writing. The film’s title directly alludes to Derek Jarman’s *Blue* (1993), made shortly before his death also from AIDS-related complications and consisting of a sound montage over a blue screen whose particular hue is replicated in *Touching Blues*’s dance space and lighting.

In addition to the memories of concrete dancers and of cinematic ancestors, there are other memories in the film. One is the memory of the virus: a non-human actor that was instrumentalized, during the time of its emergence, to differentiate between worthy or worthless bodies and identities and to criminalize unorthodox sexualities. The virus still marks today the difference between a prosperous north, where anti-retroviral treatments are relatively available and HIV infection may be lived as a chronic condition, and a Global South, where the epidemic retains crisis proportions. The virus is also a biological entity that proliferates and propagates by total recall—cloning itself inside host cells—and whose temporality exceeds human life cycles. As the film recalls, the strands of HIV alive in bodies today are the descendants of the viruses that infected “our dead sisters” in the 1980s, whose bodies still travel today in viral mutations.

And to add one more strand, there is the memory of touch. Ephemeral, light, but emotive and affectively charged, “touching” is how Pérez Galís approaches the past: “How can one touch the bodies that are no longer here?” wonders the off-screen voice at the start of the film. The film might be an answer to the question: by touching each other while dancing and, while doing so, keeping alive the memory of the departed. Touch is a figure for the overcoming of limits. It establishes, as the film points out, “a relation that



Figure 8.4 Aimar Pérez Galí, *Touching Blues* (2021).

Source: Image: Lluís Bullón. Courtesy of Aimar Pérez Galí.

exceeds one's being" and "opens the door to the other." It displaces the center of gravity outside one's body and time and allows for the attenuation of limits and for a heightened contact with the world. Touching calls up other memories from the history of contemporary dance and performance. In an essay in *Lo tocante*, Pérez Galí notes that Steve Paxton created Contact Improvisation in 1972, the year in which the United States government purportedly launched Project MK-NAOMI: the development of a highly infectious biological agent destined to curb population growth that later became known as the HIV virus (Pérez Galí 2018, 17–19). While HIV limited human contact, Contact Improvisation fostered it. It relied on touch, on bodies propped against each other, sharing their weight, and falling together, creating systems of balances and tensions that unfold without predetermined pattern. Contact Improvisation staged a form of queer solidarity and anticipated the care communities inspired by AIDS. The memory of Paxton's method is alive in Pérez Galí's choreography, which follows many of Paxton's principles. Also

alive in the film is Pepe Espaliú's *Carrying* (1992), a series of performances in which the artist, infected with HIV, was carried through several cities by a group of his friends as a way to make AIDS visible in Spanish society and to protest the silence of the art world in regard to the epidemic. *Touching Blues* merges these memory series: autobiographical, generational, cinematic, viral, and dance-centered. Touch, the contact that attenuates limits, lowers barriers, and ushers in the other, traverses these series and puts them in contact articulating a mnemonic tangle, a vibrant brown memory commons.

Donna Haraway ends *Staying with the Trouble* fabulating a future of symbionts resulting from interspecies genetic crossings who will learn from “stories, myths, performances, powers, and embodiments of entities not divided into categories recognizable to most conventional Western philosophy and politics” (2016, 161). I have tried to show in these pages that we may not need to wait until the generation of Camille 3—the mutant whose future Haraway speculates about—for these styles of learning and forms of recollection. Versions of these myths, stories, and embodiments are increasingly available now, for example, in the work I have discussed. Tangles, commons, networks of contagion and influence are becoming central tropes for memory in a world of radical mixture and hybrid interconnection. These new grammars of remembrance are especially apt for those who feel at odds with this world and its (mis)management of knowledges, histories, memories, and lives—for those new political subjects that Paul B. Preciado calls “dysphoric.” Dysphoric subjects and communities seek to extricate themselves from capitalist, patriarchal, petro-centric, racist, colonial genealogies through practices of “inadequacy, dissidence, and disidentification” (Preciado 2022, 27). And they are no longer defined by the old binary segmentation of identity: they are not “a social class, a precise gender or sex, not exactly proletarians or women, not simply homosexual, black or trans” but a conjugation of differences “without falsely totalizing or unifying them under a presumed identity or ideology” (Preciado 2022, 536). Fluctuating, multidirectional, and cross-referential, what I have been calling the brown memory commons is just one form in which a backward look may be enlisted in the politics of dysphoria. The *dysphoria mundi* needs memory as a repository of the impossible that might come to pass; of failures that signaled the inability or unwillingness of the world to accommodate the desires of those who crashed; and of still vital knowledges and affects. This memory is no longer a form of property or a technique for buttressing and stabilizing identities, but a generator of untried relationality and difference. It is not cultivated out of a devotion to the past but as a resource to navigate an often oppressive present and as a discursive technology for a queer future.

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