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Re-reading “Mourning and Militancy” and its Sources in 2022

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In the opening paragraph of the chapter on disco in *Before Pictures*, Douglas Crimp writes of a folder of miscellaneous project papers he has kept from the 1970s, which includes an old, unpursued book proposal on the topic of contemporary art since Minimalism. Crimp was "pleasantly surprised" to discover reference to "the rubric of postmodernism" in this proposal, an indication that he had been thinking of art in such terms already in 1976.¹ In a footnote he describes receiving an e-mail from "a British graduate student" asking how he came to use "postmodernist" to describe the artists in *Pictures* in the revised version of his 1977 catalogue essay, published in *October* in 1979:²

Since I hadn't used that term in the original essay, he wondered, what had transpired in the meantime? When had I begun to think about postmodernism? Was it through my association with other *October* critics such as Craig Owens? Did I take the term from architectural discourse, where by 1978 it was used fairly regularly? I couldn't remember.³

The old proposal reveals the gaps in Crimp's memory, an archival trace that reshapes a narrative of history. I thought that I understood clearly my own memory of emailing Crimp with my own set of extensive questions in February 2015, when I was starting out on my doctoral project, a psychoanalytic reassessment of art and the AIDS epidemic in the United States of America. I wanted to know if ACT UP's protest in 1988 against Nicholas Nixon's photographic portraits of people with AIDS at the Museum of Modern Art in New York had been informed by art historical precedents, such as Joyce Kozloff holding her baby in front of Picasso's *Guernica* during a Guerilla Art Action Group protest against the Vietnam War in January 1970.⁴ I remember feeling terribly hurt that his reply to my long email was short, to the point, and seemed to disagree with many of my propositions, which I have since considered extremely naïve. Looking back on this email exchange now, I can see clearly that Crimp was in fact patient and quietly generous in his direct replies to my questions, which were in any case hardly foolish.⁵

I was pleasantly surprised to rediscover our exchange as a moment of connection. The narrative of conflict I had remembered was not born out in the record; one small instance of the different archival powers of psychic ambivalence, memory and surviving written texts. It is one of Crimp's major contributions, in his essay 'Mourning and Militancy' (1989), to make analytic space for psychic negativity and the ambivalence at the heart of critical, activist and artistic responses to the AIDS

epidemic in the United States. He was hardly alone in this broad endeavor; a number of artists and thinkers including Isaac Julien, Marlon Riggs, Paul Monette and Melvin Dixon were also interrogating the political efficacy of the contradictory affects of mourning and melancholia for what José Esteban Muñoz described as the “embattled” positions of gay and black politics during the epidemic.⁶ The specificity of Crimp’s intervention lay in its immediate emergence out of New York’s AIDS activism—as he recalled, “I loved going to [ACT UP] meetings, I was hooked on meetings, I never missed a meeting unless I was out of town”—and in the directed way that he set psychoanalysis to task, asking not what Freud’s work of mourning was, but rather how his theory of mourning might be put to work.⁷

In so doing, he initiated a non-pathological discussion of queer subjective angst and aggression, an extraordinary achievement given the sheer abject violence faced by gays, lesbians, people with AIDS at this moment, and one which, as we shall see, remains provocative for queer studies today. Crimp’s argument begins with dissatisfaction with political theory that would cleave the psychic and the social into distinct, self-contained realms. He points to Simon Watney’s anecdote at the opening of his path-breaking *Policing Desire* (1987), in which he recounts the psychic violence of attending a funeral ceremony for a friend, *Bruno*, who died of AIDS, that was utterly stripped by his family of any sign of his life “as a magnificently affirmative and life-enhancing gay man” as exemplary of “the daily assaults on our consciousness” that provoke activist response.⁸ In a famous passage of polemic voice, Crimp explains that such stories are commonplace in the gay and activist movement, for:

Seldom has a society so savaged people during their hour of loss. ‘We look upon any interference with [mourning] as inadvisable or even harmful,’ warns Freud. But for anyone living daily with the AIDS crisis, ruthless interference with our bereavement is as ordinary an occurrence as reading the *New York Times*. The violence we encounter is relentless, the violence of silence and omission almost as impossible to endure as the violence of unleashed hatred and outright murder. Because this violence also desecrates the memories of our dead, we rise in anger to vindicate them. For many of us, mourning *becomes* militancy.⁹

This passage has been rightly celebrated and frequently quoted since its first publication in the journal *October* in 1989 for articulating AIDS activism as a response to mourning multiple losses phobically disavowed by hegemonic culture. It is fascinating, then, to return to *Policing Desire* to find that Watney’s opening paragraphs in fact provide a slightly different justification for his book. He observes that the

repressive atmosphere of Bruno's funeral and wake stemmed from his parents' inability to declare to anyone, even close friends and family, the cause of his death:

They were afraid. Not of a virus, but of a scandal more terrible even than the fact of his homosexuality. They were condemned to silence, to euphemism, to the shame of guilt by association, in this the most devastating moment of their lives as parents.¹⁰

Watney writes it was his realization of their profound entrapment through stigma, in a heterosexist system of their own making, that motivated *Policing Desire*: "I was, of course, deeply moved and shaken by their plight, and decided there and then that I would write a book on the subject of AIDS. Not a medical book, but one which would try to make some sense of what had been done to these people."¹¹ Crimp's gloss, that Watney's book proceeds from society's demand that gay men trammel up their grief, is subtly but significantly different. Why this sleight-of-hand? The interesting question is not whether Crimp was *wrong* to use Watney's text in this way, but rather what his reading of the opening gambit of *Policing Desire* reveals about the conditions of possibility and aims of his own essay. Between 1986 and 1989, and between Britain and the United States, a decisive shift had taken place in group organization around the AIDS crisis, in particular the formation in spring 1987 of a critical, activist response centering on direct action in the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP). ACT UP was represented through many different chapters spread across the United States, with New York as one particularly concentrated center.¹² Group formation would shortly prove crucial to the cultural response to AIDS in Britain with the first meetings of the AIDS and Photography Group at the London Lesbian and Gay Centre in August 1987. Yet, when Watney was writing in 1986, his analysis was directed toward challenging the wider delimiting operations of representation, in the media in particular, on gay men's ability even to begin organize in response to the epidemic.¹³

Watney's impulse was to prevent "the entire reproductive machinery of gay subjectivity" from succumbing to the ideological reinscription, through media representation, of homosexuality as diseased and degenerate in the epidemic.¹⁴ He describes how "multiple encounters, shifts of sexual identification, acting out, cultural reinforcements" across the 1970s enabled new affirmative possibilities for identification for gay people in Britain, and how these are threatened by the ways AIDS is represented in the media, which construct the epidemic "almost exclusively from the heterosexual viewpoint."¹⁵ As such, "the gay man is effectively and efficiently positioned as he-with-whom-identification-is-forbidden," and associations of gayness

with plague and death are allowed to proliferate.¹⁶ It is the great generosity of Watney's work that he understands representations of AIDS as damaging across the social arena; his aim to save a sexually affirmative gay subjectivity is thoroughly bound with a compassionate look at Bruno's parents as differently, tragically produced and caught in the same field of representations.¹⁷ By 1989 in New York, Crimp was faced with a set of related but different problems. An activist group had formed, yet its members were struggling in the face of an increasingly insurmountable toll of loss; meanwhile, his generation of gay men—those whose affirmative post-Stonewall culture Watney had wanted to maintain—were displaying a marked reluctance to engage in activist struggle, some violently repudiating an active sexual past, for which others were quietly mournful.

Despite these shifts in political and cultural context, clearly marked by the ever-increasing conservatism of certain gay commentators, Crimp's excision of Watney's motivating look at the plight of heterosexual parenthood is a remarkable appropriation of source material, selectively recounting the narrative to bolster his own need to explore how disturbances to mourning account for the strength of activist militancy. The subsequent move inward to consider the dynamics of mourning for AIDS activists, to open up its ambivalence and articulate "along with our rage—our terror, our guilt, and our profound sadness"—in short, the great achievement of the essay—proceeds rhetorically from his particular reading of Watney.¹⁸ Crimp does not hide his motivations. Early in the piece he explains that he writes "*for us*, for my community of AIDS activists [...], for I have seen that mourning troubles us," a clear demarcation of the context of the text's production and reception.¹⁹ He poses this form of activist critical analysis in distinction to Lee Edelman's 1989 deconstructive reading of the "Silence = Death" slogan, which "seems to have very little sense of how the emblem functions for the movement" and appears addressed only to "those within the academy."²⁰ Crimp subsequently expressed desire to rewrite this opening passage of "Mourning and Militancy" for its "tend[ency] to drive a wedge between academic theory and activist practice that I hope the essay itself otherwise contests," but nonetheless it is worth noting that the comparison was based on a selective reading of Edelman's text in the first place.²¹ For having critiqued how "Silence = Death" participates in the metaphoric substitution of the figural with the literal that also characterizes the hegemonic discourse of homophobic truisms about the epidemic (in a dense theoretical argument difficult to summarize succinctly), Edelman concludes by expressing concern about his own essay "producing a discourse in which the horrors experienced by my own community, along with other communities in America and

abroad, become the material for intellectual arabesques that inscribe those horrors within the neutralizing conventions of literary criticism.”²² Edelman instead presses for awareness of the figural underpinning of different discourses of AIDS that appeal to literal understandings of the epidemic, often for ideologically regressive ends, a critical stance resonating with Watney’s attention to representation in *Policing Desire*.

Crimp may not have been convinced by Edelman’s disclaimer, given the overall dense academic tenor of “The Plague of Discourse,” and my point is not to suggest that Crimp’s uses of Edelman or Watney are erroneous, or necessarily extra-ordinary in scholarly writing practice. Rather, I am interested in re-examining how Crimp’s construction of his argument upon the selective citation of texts has impacted archival formation. Ann Cvetkovich’s grouping of “Mourning and Militancy” with *Policing Desire* in 2003 is, for instance, indicative of the delimiting effect of the former on the latter:

[“Mourning and Militancy”] is part of a range of texts and practices, including Simon Watney’s observations about the politics of funerals in which gay men remain closeted and David Wojnarowicz’s vision of throwing dead bodies onto the steps of the White House, that have scrambled the relations between mourning and militancy, between affect and activism.²³

Re-reading Crimp’s essay today, isolating its blind spots and the way it constructs its own discursive possibility, is to re-vivify the essay in the context of the current field of invigorating work examining what, where, and how archives of AIDS have been constructed, to include recent work by Robb Hernández, Theodore (ted) Kerr, and the continuing programs of Visual AIDS.²⁴ Crimp’s articulation of mourning as, in Dagmawi Woubshet’s words, “an affect and practice that is productive, collective, political, and necessary,” has been important for much of this re-examination of the archive.²⁵ Woubshet has also shown the limitations of the Freudian model of mourning used by Crimp when articulating African-American mourning and subjectivity in the “early era of AIDS,” working through Fred Moten, Karla Holloway and Abdul Jan-Mohamed to demonstrate how pre-existing threats of violence had already bound the Black subject into a “nonnormative, temporal relationship to death, which reiterates a death date that is time bound” compounding the “time-bound” nature of the mourner’s awareness of their own possible death in the early years of AIDS.²⁶ Indeed if anything marks Edelman’s “The Plague of Discourse” as particularly dated today, it is the way his deconstructive approach assumes an absolutism of concept in Western philosophical discourse, for example in his discussion of the figure of the equation in

"Silence = Death" that leaves little space for reading this figure through different contextual frames and performative uses.

Crimp's essay remains a remarkably generative site for rethinking how the AIDS crisis constitutes multiple different sites, expressions and relations of psychic and social conflict; as Cvetkovich argues, "the continued relevance of an essay such as 'Mourning and Militancy' is another reminder that the archive of activism remains alive."²⁷ This potency is, I would suggest, because of the misappropriations it makes of other works, not in spite of them. Both Muñoz and Cvetkovich write of hearing Crimp deliver the essay at the 1989 Gay and Lesbian Studies conference at Yale, where, in the latter's words, "it marked an occasion when activists and academics were in close communication and something only later named queer theory was taking off."²⁸ In our current moment of careful reconsideration of how archives of AIDS have been formed, we would do well to return to such foundational texts to explore their aporias, rhetorical devices and productive misrecognitions. With that in mind, and by way of conclusion, I want now to consider the most recent popular effort in Britain to account for the history of AIDS, to ask not only "*What would Douglas Crimp say?*" about it, but to consider the importance of that compassionate look at heterosexual parenthood so crucial to Watney's initial project.

January 2021 saw the premiere of *It's a Sin*, a five-part television drama created for the UK's Channel 4 by Russell T. Davies, focusing on five friends, four gay men and one woman (implied to be straight), living in London in the 1980s as the AIDS crisis unfolds.²⁹ The miniseries is best understood as achieving the representation of several set pieces from the period never before shown in a British television drama. We see, for example, people with AIDS locked in their hospital rooms with meals left outside the door, a family burning a pyre of their dead gay son's possessions, scared and isolated gay men calling into the London Gay Switchboard to discuss their fears of illness, homophobic figures of authority contemptuous of people with AIDS, closeted Tories looking to cash in on Thatcherite privatization of the British economy; the list could go on. The story that series-creator Davies concocts to weave these set pieces into a narrative sees the closeted Ritchie Tozer (Olly Alexander) arriving in London in 1981, from a childhood home on the Isle of Wight presided over by a bullish father, Clive (Sean Dooley) and an anxious, smothering mother, Valerie (Keeley Hawes). Once he comes out onto the London gay scene, Ritchie soon falls in with Jill Baxter (Lydia West) and Ash Mukherjee (Nathaniel Curtis) (two characters whose backstories and motivations remain a mystery throughout), alongside Roscoe Babatunde (Omari Douglas), a British Nigerian recently thrown out by his parents because of his

sexuality, and Colin Morris-Jones (Callum Scott Howells), a sweet, seemingly-virginal, trainee Jermyn Street sales-clerk from the Welsh valleys. The five set up house together in "The Pink Palace" in Soho, and see their lives transformed by AIDS as the decade unfolds, with Colin dying halfway through the series in 1986, and Ritchie, a budding actor whose career is beginning to flourish, in the final episode in 1991.

The series was subject to immediate, widespread, lavish praise in the British mainstream and alternative press for its depiction of gay life in London in the 1980s, followed, mercifully, by a handful of slightly more reflective pieces considering some of the occluded narratives and clichés the series trades in, such as the lacking representation of women with AIDS, and the Black British conservatism of Roscoe's parents.³⁰ Davies goes to great lengths throughout the plot to assign blame, pointing the finger at the homophobic society of the 1980s that allowed the AIDS crisis to happen, in particular on the two petty bourgeois mothers, Valerie and Colin's first landlord, who come to stand for the reactionary culture of Thatcherism (one imagines that Ritchie's family own shares in British Gas). In the culminating scene of the series, an emotional Jill confronts Valerie on the seafront of the Isle of Wight, where Ritchie has been taken by his parents to live out his final days; Jill and Roscoe were in hot pursuit, but denied a visit to Ritchie by Valerie before his death. Jill charges Valerie as responsible:

[...] all of this is your fault. [...] Right from the start. 'Cos I don't know what happened to you to make that house *so loveless*, but that's why Ritchie grew up so ashamed of himself. [...] And then he killed people! [...] He was ashamed. And he kept on being ashamed, he kept shame going by having sex with men, and infecting them and then running away. Cos that's what shame does, Valerie, it makes him think *he deserves it*. The wards are full of men who think they deserve it. They are dying, and a little bit of them thinks 'Yes, this is right, I brought this on myself, it's my fault because the sex that I love is killing me.' I mean, it's astonishing. The perfect virus came along to prove *you* right. So that's what happened, in *your* house. He died because of you. *They all die* because of you.³¹

It is astonishing and reprehensible to see people with HIV described as killers, no matter what the justification, especially given the ongoing prevalence of HIV criminalization laws around the world.³² Lying in his hospital bed, Ritchie had previously pondered his own sexual compulsion in such terms: "I wonder how many I killed? I knew it was wrong, and I kept on doing it." As the playwright Brian Mullin argued, this pop-psychological attempt by Davies to explain the epidemic as a product

of gay shame induced by internalized homophobia ultimately understands gay sexuality within a moralistic and pathological frame, in a narrative that "desperately seeks to assign villains and victims," fails to show people *living* with AIDS, and so equates sex with death.³³

Jill's showdown with Valerie is all the more remarkable given that until the final episode, the script has figured the father as the primary problematic force for Ritchie's sexuality. Once Valerie and Clive burst into Ritchie's hospital room in the Middlesex Hospital, to find out that their son is gay and dying of AIDS-related lymphoma all at once, the father mysteriously fades away as an emotional and narrative force in a dramatic pivot toward the mother, emphasized in a series of tracking shots that follow her marching up and down hospital corridors in an angry attempt find someone to blame for Ritchie's plight. Then follows an extraordinary scene in which, talking to Jill, Valerie attempts first to disavow the truth of Ritchie's gayness, then following Jill's insistence that he is "beautifully gay," comments, "And now he's got a gay disease," to which Jill replies, "Yes. Yes he has." Sandra (Ruth Sheen), another mother of another gay man dying off-screen enters and chides Valerie for not realizing the obvious fact that Ritchie is gay: "You're his mother, you're supposed to think about him day and night. So what the fuck were you doing?" Valerie retaliates by blaming Jill for conspiring as a beard to prevent her from realizing, angrily calling her "a chorus girl, running around after these boys with no life of your own," and asking why she doesn't have a boyfriend.

It is not only remarkable that the script blithely misconirms AIDS as a gay disease, but also that femininity and the maternal are increasingly freighted as, respectively, the voice of reason, the spokesperson for the gay characters, and ultimately culpable for their deaths, all at once. Davies will later hint that Valerie has previously suffered at the hands of patriarchy herself, when she mutters darkly to the dying Ritchie that his grandfather "was a terrible man." Davies has commented how in a longer version of the series, putatively not possible because of the reluctance of British television companies to produce a series about AIDS, we would have learned of "sexual abuse at the heart of the Tozer household and how Valerie ended up like she did."³⁴ Whatever the reason this ended up on the cutting room floor, the result is a text in which motherhood is charged unsustainably by two sympathetic characters, Jill and Sandra, as both fully responsible for the AIDS crisis ("*They all die* because of you") and as a role of exclusive devotion to the child ("you're supposed to think about him day and night"). In "Mourning and Militancy" Crimp moves away from Watney's motivating empathy over the loss of a child in a homophobic society. In *It's a Sin* Valerie is charged as

responsible by Jill's mourning and militancy, and one wonders if the series would have been stronger if it had also included some of Watney's understanding of loss, causality, blame and representation. Watney's compassionate look, that would understand the freighted position of parenthood as caught in an impasse of sexual discrimination of its own making, damaged *and* produced through heterosexist media representation, a look so crucial to a sustained, political analysis of the AIDS crisis in Britain, is nowhere to be seen.

The character of Jill is just as, if not more, concerning. For neither the warmth of Lydia West's performance, nor the fact that the character was based on a friend of Davies, can hide the fact that the script tells us absolutely nothing about the inner life of this character.³⁵ Unlike Ritchie, Roscoe or Colin, she is not granted a formal introduction in the first episode, and the plot proceeds inexplicably to shunt her around into a variety volunteering and caring roles for dying gay men. The fact the script shows nothing of her as a sexual character, with needs and desires (apparently another victim of cutting), and crucially, *conflicts* of her own, results in, as scholar Annie Ring has noted, an unsustainable portrait of caring Black femininity that unwittingly colludes with the privatization and cutting of state-funded health and care services.³⁶ Ring rightly argues that "the most problematic part of Jill's caring role is her lack of ambivalence," following Rozsika Parker's path-breaking work on maternal ambivalence to insist that the carer's feelings of anger, rage and frustration at the cared-for person are fundamentally political, for acknowledging the psychic challenges of certain tasks of care illuminates them as activities the state does not deign to support.³⁷ Crimp showed us in 1989 that our understanding of political anger in the AIDS crisis couldn't be confined to shouting on the streets alone, that any sustainable political challenge to the willful blindness of social institutions has to reckon with ambivalence, including activists' "more painful feelings of survivor's guilt, often exacerbated by our secret wishes, during our lovers' and friends' protracted illnesses, that they would just die and let us get on with our lives."³⁸ Shearing Jill's character of such subjective angst and inner life renders her as a highly problematic ideal, a Black femininity seemingly able endlessly to give and care for dying friends. The circulating #BeMoreJill, prevalent on social media following the broadcast of *It's a Sin* becomes a fundamentally unsustainable injunction, working to block necessary, political consideration of the psychic toll of loss and care.

I don't know if this is what Douglas Crimp would have said of *It's a Sin*, but I do know that I wouldn't be able to say it without his insights, especially into political ambivalence in "Mourning and Militancy." The series proves that Crimp's work

remains contemporary, in the sense that Joan Copjec identifies, as "out of sync" with popular discourse, and hence still has much work to do for the analysis of the politics of representation, not just within the academy.³⁹ His final essay in *Melancholia and Moralism* expresses concern at the gaps between academic and popular queer writing, in the context of certain popular gay writers' repeated insistence across the 1990s on the irresponsibility of some gay men as sexually compulsive.⁴⁰ Cautioning against moralizing views of sexuality as offering a psychic defense against the complexity of the epidemic, dangerous because simplistic and disavowing the limits of self-understanding, he asks, "what queer theory has yet to learn is no less urgent: How do we make what we know knowable to legions?"⁴¹ The question remains pressing today.

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Footnotes

1. Douglas Crimp, *Before Pictures* (Brooklyn and Chicago: Dancing Foxes/University of Chicago Press, 2016), 183. [↵](#)
2. Crimp, *Before Pictures*, 287. [↵](#)
3. Crimp, *Before Pictures*, 287. [↵](#)
4. John Hendricks & John Toche, *The Guerilla Art Action Group, 1969-1976: A Selection* (New York: Printed Matter, 1978), n.p.; Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 21-22. [↵](#)
5. Crimp was not certain, but he did not believe that ACT UP had been informed by anti-war protest in the museum in this particular case. [↵](#)

6. José Esteban Muñoz, "Photographies of Mourning: Melancholia and Ambivalence in Van DerZee, Mapplethorpe, and *Looking for Langston*," in *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 57-74 (p. 60); Douglas Crimp, "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988), 237-71; Kobena Mercer, "Dark and Lovely Too: Black Gay Men in Independent Film," in *Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Male Film and Video*, ed. Martha Gever, John Greyson and Pratibha Parmar (New York: Routledge, 1993), 238-56; Dagmawi Woubshet, *The Calendar of Loss: Race, Sexuality and Mourning in the Early Era of AIDS* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2015), passim. [↵](#)
7. Douglas Crimp Interview, May 16, 2007, *The ACT UP Oral History Project*, 29. <https://web.archive.org/web/20160625105940/http://www.actuporalhistory.org/interviews/images/crimp.pdf>. [↵](#)
8. Douglas Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy" (1989), in *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), 128-49 (pp. 136-7). [↵](#)
9. Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy," 137, emphasis in original. [↵](#)
10. Simon Watney, *Policing Desire: Pornography, Aids and the Media* (London: Methuen, 1987), 7. [↵](#)
11. Watney, *Policing Desire*, 7-8. [↵](#)
12. The multiple histories of the New York chapter are charted in the 186 interviews that make up The ACT UP Oral History Project, spearheaded by Sarah Schulman and Jim Hubbard, <http://www.actuporalhistory.org/>, accessed 22 February 2021. Schulman provides a new account in her recent book, *Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2021). [↵](#)
13. "The ways in which gay men are able to organise in relation to Aids – both to the medical and the ideological situation, is dependent on our image of ourselves, and this imagery is always and everywhere subject to state intervention and control." Watney, *Policing Desire*, 17. Jackson Davidow has charted the meetings and significance of the AIDS and Photography Group in "A Diasporic Virus: The Worlding of Black and Queer Cultural Resistance in London," in his *Viral Visions: Art, Activism and Epidemiology in the Global AIDS Pandemic*, Unpublished PhD Thesis,

Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2019, 109-70. For accounts of the AIDS and Photography Group from participating members, see Tessa Boffin and Sunil Gupta, "Introduction," to *Ecstatic Antibodies: Resisting the AIDS Mythology* (London: River Orams Press, 1990), 1-5, and Chris Boot, "A battle (against) Gothic half-truths," *Digital Journalist*, Special Issue: "20 Years: AIDS and Photography" (2001), http://digitaljournalist.org/issue0106/voices_boot.htm accessed 28 February 2021. [↵](#)

14. Watney, *Policing Desire*, 18. [↵](#)

15. Watney, *Policing Desire*, 18, 12. [↵](#)

16. Watney, *Policing Desire*, 12. [↵](#)

17. Watney, *Policing Desire*, 18. [↵](#)

18. Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy," 149. [↵](#)

19. Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy," 131. [↵](#)

20. Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy," 130-1. [↵](#)

21. Douglas Crimp, "Melancholia and Moralism: An Introduction," in *Melancholia and Moralism*, 1-26 (pp. 18-19, Footnote 24). Interestingly, in the recent publication *United by AIDS: An Anthology on Art in Response to HIV/AIDS*, ed. Raphael Gygax & Heike Munder (Zurich: Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, 2019), Crimp's essay is reprinted with this opening section edited out entirely, apparently upon consultation with the author (pp. 68-88). This further severs the essay from the context of its production, which, I am arguing, may not be the most fruitful direction of critical travel. James Boaden articulates a useful critique of the *United by AIDS* anthology in James Boaden, "United by AIDS?," *Art History* 44, no. 5 (2021): 1090-97. [↵](#)

22. Lee Edelman, "The Plague of Discourse: Politics, Literary Theory, and 'AIDS'" (1989), in *Homographesis: essays in gay literary and cultural theory* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), 79-92 (p. 92). [↵](#)

23. Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 163. [↵](#)

24. Robb Hernández, *Archiving an Epidemic: Art, AIDS, and the Queer Chicana Avant-Garde* (New York: NYU Press, 2019); Theodore (ted) Kerr (ed.), *On Curating 42: "What You Don't Know About AIDS Could Fill A Museum"* (September, 2019), https://on-curating.org/issue-42.html#.Yc4s_hPMKqA. [↵](#)
25. Woubshet, *The Calendar of Loss*, 12-13. [↵](#)
26. Woubshet, *The Calendar of Loss*, 18-19. Woubshet uses "the early era of AIDS" to refer to the period prior to the introduction of Highly Active Anti-Retroviral Treatment in 1996. [↵](#)
27. Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 165. [↵](#)
28. Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 162; José Esteban Muñoz, "Ghosts of Public Sex: Utopian Longings, Queer Memories," in *Policing Public Sex: Queer Politics and the Future of AIDS Activism*, ed. Dangerous Bedfellows (Boston: South End Press, 1996), 355-72, later republished in his *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009). [↵](#)
29. *It's a Sin* was released for streaming in the United States on HBO Max Original in February 2021. [↵](#)
30. Juno Roche, "*It's a Sin* is beautiful, but it neglects the women who also died of AIDS," *The i* (29 January 2021), <https://inews.co.uk/opinion/its-a-sin-is-beautiful-but-it-neglects-the-women-who-also-died-of-aids-848579> accessed 25 February 2021; Alim Kheraj, with Richard Coles, Omari Douglas, Owen Jones, Jason Okundaye, Lisa Power and Marc Thompson, "*It's a Sin*: 'There is such a raw truth to it,'" *The Guardian* (10 February 2021), <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2021/feb/10/its-a-sin-there-is-such-a-raw-truth-to-it> accessed 25 February 2021. [↵](#)
31. *It's a Sin* (2021, five episodes), directed by Peter Hoar, written and created by Russell T. Davies. Emphasis reflects Lydia West's delivery. [↵](#)
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37. Ring, "Watching *It's a Sin*." [↵](#)
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39. Joan Copjec, "Period Piece," *October* 171 (Winter, 2020), 147-9 (p. 149). [↵](#)
40. Douglas Crimp, "Sex and Sensibility, or Sense and Sexuality," in *Melancholia and Moralism*, 281-301. [↵](#)

41. Crimp, “Sex and Sensibility, or Sense and Sexuality,” 301. [↩](#)