with consumers bored and alienated from even the banalized sensational versions of their own lives they receive from docudrama, infomercials, and political news propaganda. “Hi, hon!” As I write this sentence, a letter to unnamed recipients (who might respond, “I’m Batman!”), the television news anchor reports that someone else’s home video has become important news. She closes the story, noting, “This video is being sent to the Smithsonian.”

4 Queer Nationality

(written with Elizabeth Freeman)

... now the skins felt powerful and human.
They became lords of sounds and lesser things.
They passed nations through their mouths.
They sat in judgement.
— Zora Neale Hurston

We Are Everywhere. We Want Everything.
— Queer Nation, Gay Pride parade, New York, 1991

I Pledge Allegiance to the F(1)ag

At the end of Sandra Bernhard’s Without You I’m Nothing, the diva wraps herself in an American flag. This act, which emblazons her interpretation of Prince’s “Little Red Corvette,” culminates her performance of feminine drag, feminist camp. Staging not a cross-dressing that binarizes sex but a masquerade that smudges the clarity of gender, Bernhard frames “woman” within a constellation of sexual practices whose forms of publicity change by the decade, by subcultural origin, by genres of pleasure (music, fashion, political theater), and by conventions of collective erotic fantasy. But having sexually overdressed for the bulk of the film, Bernhard strips down to a flag and a sequined red, white, and blue G-string and pasties, and thus exposes a national body, her body. This national body does not address a mass or abstract audience of generic Americans, nor does it campily evoke a “typical” American citizen’s nostalgia for collective memory, ritual, and affect. Bernhard flags her body to mark a fantasy of erotic identification with someone present, in the intimate room: it is a national fantasy, displayed as a spectacle of desire, and a fantasy apparently external to the official national frame, of communion with a black woman whose appearance personifies authenticity.
In March 1991, the Sunday fashion section of the Chicago Tribune featured the Gulf War as a fashion event. Adding to the already widely publicized rush by citizens to own their very own gas masks and military fatigues, supplementing the fad for patriotic T-shirts and sweatshirts bearing American flags and mottoes like “These Colors Won’t Run,” this style section featured the new rage in feminine fashion: red, white, and blue. Mobilized by the patriotic furor generated by the war, women en masse were signifying through the color combination and not the icon, capitalizing on the capacity of the flag’s traces to communicate personal politics without explicit polemic. The dissolution of the flag into flagness also protected the consumer from being charged with desecrating the flag, should it become stained with food or sweat, or singed with the dropped ashes of a cigarette.

In 1991 RFD, a magazine for rural gays with connections to the Radical Faeries, released a poster featuring a naked young white man with an erection on a pedestal, set against the background of an American flag. Two captions graced this portrait: “BRING OUR BOYS HOME AND WHOLE THIS SOLSTICE PEACE NOW!” and “What could be more American than young, hard man/boy flesh?”

A rhetorical question? Having witnessed this rush to consume the flag, to fuse it with the flesh, we conclude that at present the nation suffers from Americana nervosa, a compulsive self-gorging on ritual images. This grotesque fantasy structure was paraded in the 1988 presidential election by the Republican flap over whether citizens should be legally obliged to say the Pledge of Allegiance. It was further extended from mass public struggle into the Supreme Court by constitutional battles over whether the flag should be exposed to mortality’s contagion in the form of its own ashes or dirt, and has recast national patriotism as a question, not of political identity, but of proper public expression, loyal self-censorship, and personal discipline. No longer is the struggle to secure national discursive propriety located mainly on the general terrain of “freedom of speech,” state policies against certain sexual practices, and the regulation of privately consumed sexual images within the U.S. mail: the struggle is now also over proper public submission to national iconicity and over the nation’s relation to gender, to sexuality, and to death.

If, in the wake of the election and the remilitarization of America, official patriotic discourse casts the American flag in an epidemic crisis and struggles to manage its public meaning through a sublime collective
manufactured consent, the consumption of nationality in the nineties appears motivated not by a satisfaction that already exists but by a collective desire to reclaim the nation for pleasure, and specifically the pleasure of spectacular public self-entitlement. Queer Nation has taken up the project of coordinating a new nationality. Its relation to nationhood is multiple and ambiguous, however, taking as much from the insurgent nationalism of oppressed peoples as from the revolutionary idealism of the United States. Since its inception in 1990, it has invented collective local rituals of resistance, mass cultural spectacles, an organization, and even a lexicon to achieve these ends. It aims to capitalize on the difficulty of locating the national “public,” whose consent to self-expression founds modern national identity.1

Queer Nation’s outspoken promotion of a national sexuality not only discloses that mainstream national identity touts a subliminal sexuality more official than a state flower or national bird, but also makes explicit how thoroughly the local experience of the body is framed by laws, policies, and social customs regulating sexuality. Queer Nation’s tactics of invention appropriate for gay politics both grassroots and mass-mediated forms of countercultural resistance from left, feminist, and civil-rights movements of the sixties—the ones that insisted that the personal is political, engaging the complex relation between local and national practices. Also, in the nostalgic impulse of postmodernism, Queer Nation redeploy these tactics in a kind of guerrilla warfare that names all concrete and abstract spaces of social communication as places where “the people” live, and thus as “national” sites ripe for both transgression and legitimate visibility.2 Its tactics are to cross borders, to occupy spaces, and to mime the privileges of normality—in short, to simulate “the national” with a camp inflection. This model of political identity imitates not so much the “one man, one vote” caucusing polemic mentality of mainstream politics, but rather the individual and mass identities of consumers: Queer Nation, itself a collection of “local” affinity groups, has produced images, occupied public spaces of consumption, like bars and malls, and refashioned the culture of the trademark.3 Exploiting the structures of identification and the embodied and disembodied scenes of erotic contact, substitution, publicity, and exchange so central to the allure of nationalism and capitalism, Queer Nation operates precisely in the American mode.4

In this chapter we seek to understand the political logic of Queer Nationality and to trace the movement’s spectacular intentions and effects. We will, in the next three sections, describe Queer Nation in its strongest tactical moments, as when it exploits the symbolic designs of mass and national culture in order to dismantle the standardizing apparatus that organizes all manner of sexual practice into “facts” of sexual identity,5 as when it mobilizes a radically wide range of knowledge—modes of understanding from science to gossip—to reconstitute “information” about queerness, thus transforming the range of reference “queer” has by multiplying its specifications.6 Whether or not Queer Nation survives as an organization past the present tense of our writing,7 the movement provides us with these discursive political tactics not simply as fodder for history but also as a kind of incitement to reconfigure the conditions under which further interventions into the juridical, policy, and popular practices of contemporary America must be thought and made.8

This demands an expanded politics of description. We might say “an expanded politics of erotic description,” but crucial to a sexually radical movement for social change is the transgression of categorical distinctions between sexuality and politics, with their typically embedded divisions between public, private, and personal concerns. The multiplicity of social spaces, places where power and desire are enacted and transferred, need to be disaggregated and specified. The abstract, disembodied networks of electronic visual, aural, and textual communication, the nationalized systems of juridical activity and official public commentary, the state and local political realms that are not at all simply microcosmic of the national: all coexist with both the manifestly pleasuring or money-making embodiments of local, national, and global capitalism, and with the random or customary interactions of social life—this sentence could, and must, go on interminably. These spaces are hard to describe, because they are all unbounded, dialectically imagined, sometimes powerful, and sometimes irrelevant to the theory, practice, and transformation of sexual hegemony. Whatever they are, at the moment they are resolutely national. Queer Nation’s nationalist-style camp counterpolitics incorporates this discursive and territorial problem, shifting between a utopian politics of identity, difference, dispersion, and specificity and a pluralist agenda, in the liberal sense, that imagines a “gorgeous mosaic”6 of difference without a model of conflict. Our final section, “With You Out We’re Nothing, and Beyond,” supports and extends Queer Nation’s contestation of existing cultural spaces, but seeks to reopen the question of nationalism’s value as an infidel model of transgression and resistance, for the very naturalizing stereotypes of official nationality can infect even the most radical insurgent forms. In other words, this is an antiassimila-
tionalist narrative about an antiassimilationist movement. It must be emphasized, however, that disidentification with U.S. nationality is not, at this moment, even a theoretical option for queer citizens: as long as PWAs (People with AIDS) require state support, as long as the official nation invests its identity in the pseudoright to police nonnormative sexual representations and sexual practices, the lesbian, gay, feminist, and queer communities in the United States do not have the privilege to disregard national identity. We are compelled, then, to read America’s lips. What can we do to force the officially constituted nation to speak a new political tongue?

Recently, official America has sought to manage an explicit relation between national power and the vulnerable body by advertising an unironic consecration of masculine military images and surgical incisions into the borders of other sovereign nations. Queer Nation, in dramatic contrast, produces images in response to the massive violence against racial, sexual, gendered, and impoverished populations within the U.S. borders, a violence emblematized by, but in no way limited to, the federal response to AIDS. A brief history of the movement will help explain the genesis of its polymorphous impulses. Founded at an ACT UP New York meeting in April of 1990, Queer Nation aimed to extend the kinds of democratic counterpolitics deployed on behalf of AIDS activism for the transformation of public sexual discourse in general. Crimp and Rolston’s AIDS Demo Graphics is to date the fullest and most graphic record of ACT UP’s intervention into local, state, and national systems of power and publicity. This specification of mainstream sites of power was made necessary by federal stonewalling on the subject of AIDS treatment, support, and education among institutions in the political public sphere, where the bureaucratic norm is to disavow accountability to vulnerable populations. ACT UP recognizes the necessity to master the specific functions of political bureaucracies and to generate loud demands that these live up to their promise to all of “the people.” Among other strategies, it exploits the coincidence between national and commercial spectacle by pirating advertising techniques: an alliance with the political artists called Gran Fury has produced a sophisticated poster campaign to transform the passive public space of New York into a zone of political pedagogy. Queer Nation takes from ACT UP this complex understanding of political space as fundamental to its insistence on making all public spheres truly safe for all of the persons who occupy them, not just in psychic loyalty but in everyday and embodied experience. To be safe in the national sense means not just safe from bashing, not just safe from discrimination, but safe for demonstration, in the mode of patriotic ritual, which always involves a deployment of affect, knowledge, spectacle, and, crucially, a kind of banality, ordinariness, popularity.

Through its activism Queer Nation seeks to redefine the community—its rights, its visibility—and take it into what’s been claimed as straight political and social space. “Queers Read This” asks to be read as the accompanying declaration of nationalism. It says: In this culture, being queer means you’ve been condemned to death; appreciate our power and our bond; realize that whenever one of us is hurt we all suffer; know that we have to fight for ourselves because no one else will. It says, this is why we are a nation of queers, and why you must feel yourself a part. Its language seems to borrow from other, equally “threatening” power movements—black nationalist, feminist separatist.

The key to the paradoxes of Queer Nation is the way it exploits internal difference. That is, Queer Nation understands the propriety of queerness to be a function of the diverse spaces in which it aims to become explicit. It names multiple local and national publics; it does not look for a theoretical coherence to regulate in advance all of its tactics: all politics in the Queer Nation are imagined on the street. Finally, it always refuses closeting strategies of assimilation and goes for the broadest and most explicit assertion of presence. This loudness involves two main kinds of public address: internal, for the production of safe collective queer spaces, and external, in a cultural pedagogy emblematized by the post-Black Power slogan “We’re Here. We’re Queer. Get Used to It.” If “I’m Black and I’m Proud” sutures the first-person performative to racial visibility, transforming the speaker from racial object to ascendant subject, Queer Nation’s slogan stages the shift from silent absence into present speech, from nothingness to collectivity, from a politics of embodiment to one of space, whose power erupts from the ambiguity of “here.” Where?

Internal: I Hate Straights, and Other “Queeritical” Prayers

Nancy Fraser’s recent essay on postmodernity and identity politics argues that countercultural groups engage in a dialectic with mainstream public culture, shifting between internal self-consolidation and reinvest-
ment of the irrelatively essentialist “internal” identity into the normalizing discussions of the mass public sphere. In this dialectic, the subaltern indeed becomes a speaking player in her own public identity, for the public is an intelligibly “dominant” space characterized by collective norms. Fraser’s model does not work for Queer Nation, which neither recognizes a single internal or privatized interest nor certifies one mainstream whose disposition constitutes the terrain for counterpolitics. This distinguishing mark of Queer Nation—its capacity to include cultural resistance, opposition, and subcultural consolidation in a mix of tactics from identity politics and postmodern metropolitan information flows—will thus govern our inside narrative. We will shuttle between a dispersed variety of Queer National events, falsely bringing into narrative logic and collective intentionality what has been a deliberately unsystematized politics.

If there is one manifesto of this polyvocal movement, defining the lamination of a gay liberation politics and new gay power tactics, it is, famously, the “I Hate Straights” polemic distributed as a broadside at the Gay Pride parades in New York and Chicago in the summer of 1990. “I Hate Straights,” printed (at least in Chicago) over the image of a raised clenched masculine fist, is a monologue, a slave narrative without decorum, a manifesto of rage and its politics. Gone, the assimilationist patience of some gay liberation identity politics; gone, the assertive rationality of the “homosexual” subject who seeks legitimacy by signifying, through “straight” protocols, that “civilization” has been sighted on the cultural margin.

“I Hate Straights,” instead, “proceeds in terms of the unavoidable usefulness of something that is very dangerous.” What is dangerous is rage, and the way it is deployed both to an “internal” audience of gay subjects and an “external” straight world. The broadside begins with personal statements: “I have friends. Some of them are straight. Year after year, I see my straight friends. I want to see them, to see how they are doing. . . . [and] year after year I continue to realize that the facts of my life are irrelevant to them and that I am only half listened to.” The speaker remains unheard because straights refuse to believe that gay subjects are in exile from privilege, from ownership of a point of view that American social institutions and popular cultural practices secure: “insiders claim that [gays] already are” included in the privileges of the straight world. But gay subjects are excluded from the privileges of procreation, of family, of the public fantasy that circulates through these institutions: indeed, it seems that only the public discipline of gayness keeps civilization from “melt[ing] back into the primeval ooze.”

In the face of an exile caused by this arrogant heterosexual presumption of domestic space and privilege, the speaker lights into a list of proclamations headed by “I hate straights”: “I” hates straights on behalf of the gay people who have to emotionally “take care” of the straights who feel guilty for their privilege; “I” hates straights for requiring the sublimation of gay rage as the price of their beneficent tolerance. “You’ll catch more flies with honey,” the speaker hears; “Now look who’s generalizing,” they say, as if the minoritized group itself had invented the “crude taxonomy” under which it labored. In response, the flyer argues, “BASH BACK . . . LET YOURSELF BE ANGRY . . . THAT THERE IS NO PLACE IN THIS COUNTRY WHERE WE ARE SAFE.”

The speaker’s designation of “country” as the space of danger complexly marks the indices of social identity through which this invective circulates. “I” mentions two kinds of “we”: gay and American subjects, all of whom have to “thank President Bush for planting a fucking tree” in public while thousands of PWAs die for lack of political visibility. The nation of the Bush and the tree here becomes a figure of “nature” that includes the malignant neglect of AIDS populations, including and especially (here) gay men. Straights ask the gay community to self-censor, because anger is not “productive.” Meanwhile, the administrators of straight America commit omissions of policy to assert that healthy heterosexual identity (the straight and undiseseaded body) is a prerequisite to citizenship of the United States. The treatise goes on to suggest that the national failure to secure justice for all citizens is experienced locally, in public spaces where physical gay-bashing takes place, and in even more intimate sites like the body: “Go tell [straights] to go away until they have spent a month walking hand in hand in public with someone of the same sex. After they survive that, then you’ll hear what they have to say about queer anger. Otherwise, tell them to shut up and listen.”

The distribution of this document to a predominantly gay population at Gay Pride parades underscores a fundamental Queer Nation policy. Visibility is critical if a safe public existence is to be forged for American gays, for whom the contemporary nation has no positive political value. The cities where Queer Nation lives already contain local gay communities, locales that secure spaces of safe embodiment for capital and sexual expenditures. For Queer Nation, they also constitute sites within which political bases can be founded. This emphasis on safe spaces,
secured for bodies by capital and everyday life practices also, finally, constitutes a refusal of the terms national discourse uses to frame the issue of sexuality: “Being queer is not about a right to privacy: it is about the freedom to be public. . . . It’s not about the mainstream, profit-margins, patriotism, patriarchy or being assimilated. . . . Being queer is grass roots because we know that everyone of us, every body, every cunt, every heart and ass and dick is a world of pleasure waiting to be explored. Everyone of us is a world of infinite possibility.” Localness, here transposed into the language of worldness, is dedicated to producing a new politics from the energy of a sentimentally and erotically excessive sexuality. The ambiguities of this sexual geography are fundamental to producing the new referent, a gay community whose erotics and politics are transubstantial. Meanwhile, in the hybrid Queer/American nation, orthodox forms of political agency linger, in modified form. For example, Queer Nation proclaims, “An army of lovers cannot lose!” But this military fantasy refers in its irony to a set of things: counterviolences in local places, sixties movements to make love, not war, and also the invigorated persecution of queer subjects in the U.S. military during the Reagan/Bush years.

Thus too the “queeritical” element in some Queer Nation productions exceeds American proprieties, replacing the secular pledge to the flag in broadsides headed “I praise life with my vulva” and “I praise God with my erection.” Although we might say that this queeriticality is reactionary, reflecting a supapolitical move to spiritual identity, we might also say that this is literally conservative, an attempt to save space for hope, prayer, and simple human relations—a Queer Nation “Now I lay me down to sleep.” These pieties assert the luck the praying subjects feel to be sleeping with someone of their own sex, thus promoting “homosexuality” in the way Queer Nation wants to do, as a mode of ordinary identification and pleasure. But these prayers also parody the narrative convention of normative prayer to find a safe space for eluding official and conventional censorship of public sexuality: *Thing* magazine reports, indeed, that the broadside has come under criticism for seeming to promote promiscuity. In our view, the prayers counter the erotophobia of gay and straight publics who want to speak of “lifestyles” and not sex. Finally, just as the genre of the circulating broadside reveals how gay and straight populations topographically overlap, so does this use of prayer itself avow the futility of drawing comprehensive affective boundaries between gay and straight subjects. Queer Nation’s emphasis on public language and media, its exploitation of the tension between local embodiment and mass abstraction, forfeits the possibility of such taxonomic clarity.

Outside: Politics in Your Face

On February 23, 1967, in a congressional hearing concerning the security clearance of gay men for service in the Defense Department, a psychiatrist named Dr. Charles Socarides testified that the homosexual “does not know the boundary of his own body. . . . He does not know where his body ends and space begins.” Precisely—the spiritual and other moments of internal consolidation which we have described allow the individual bodies of Queer Nationals to act as visibly queer flashcards, in an ongoing project of cultural pedagogy aimed at exposing the range and variety of bounded spaces upon which heterosexual supremacy depends. Moving out from the psychological and physical “safe spaces” it creates, Queer Nation broadcasts the strictness of public space, and hence its explicit or implicit danger to gays. The queer body—as an agent of publicity, as a unit of self-defense, and finally as a spectacle of ecstasy—becomes the locus where mainstream culture’s discipline of gay citizens is written and where the pain caused by this discipline is transformed into rage and pleasure. Using alternating strategies of menace and meriment, agents of Queer Nation have come to see and conquer places that present the danger of violence to gays and lesbians, to reterritorialize them.

Twenty-three years after Dr. Socarides’ mercifully brief moment of fame, New Yorkers began to display on their chests a graphic interpretation of his fear for the national defense. The T-shirt they wore portrays a silhouette of the United States, with the red tint of the East Coast and the blue tint of the West Coast fading and blending in the middle. Suddenly, the heartland of the country is a shocking new shade of queer: red, white, and blue make lavender. This, Queer Nation’s first T-shirt, extends the project of an earlier graphic produced by Adam Rolston, which shows a placard that reads, “I Am Out, Therefore I Am.” But Queer Nation’s shirt locates the public space in which the individual Cartesian subject must be out, transforming that space in order to survive. Queer Nation’s design maps a psychic and bodily territory which cannot be colonized—lavender territory—and expands it to include, potentially, the entire nation. This lamination of the country to the
body conjoins individual and national liberation: just as Dr. Socarides dreaded, the boundaries between what constitutes individual and what constitutes national space are explicitly blurred. "National defense" and "heterosexual defense" become interdependent projects of boundary maintenance that Queer Nation graphically underlines, showing that these colors will run.

While the Queer Nation shirt exploits heterosexist fears of the "spread of a lifestyle" through dirty laundry by publicizing its wearer as both a gay native and a missionary serving the spread of homosexuality, not all of their tactics are this benign. The optimistic assertion that an army of lovers cannot lose masks the seriousness with which Queer Nation has responded to the need for a pseudomilitia on the order of the Guardian Angels. The Pink Panthers, initially conceived of at a Queer Nation meeting (they are now a separate organization), provided a searing response to the increased violence that has accompanied the general increase of gay visibility in America. The Panthers, a foot patrol which straddles the "safe spaces" described in the first section of this chapter and the "unsafe spaces" of public life in America, not only defend other queer bodies but aim to be a continual reminder of them. Dressed in black T-shirts with pink triangles enclosing a black paw print, they move unarmored in groups, linked by walkie-talkies and whistles. In choosing a uniform which explicitly marks them as targets, as successors of the Black Power movement, and as seriocomic detectives, the Panthers bring together the abstract threat implicit in the map graphic described above, the embodied threat implicit in individual queers' crossing their subcultural boundaries, and the absurdity that finds this condition of sexual violence.

The Panthers' slogan is "Bash Back." It announces that the locus of gay oppression has shifted from the legal to the extralegal arena, and from national-juridical to ordinary everyday forms. The menace of "Bash Back" reciprocates the menace of physical violence that keeps gays and lesbians invisible and/or physically restricted to their mythically safe neighborhoods. But rather than targeting specific gay bashers or lashing out at random heterosexuals, the Panthers train in self-defense techniques and travel unarmored: "Bash Back" simply intends to mobilize the threat gay bashers use so effectively — strength not in numbers but in the presence of a few bodies who represent the potential for widespread violence — against the bashers themselves. In this way, the slogan turns the bodies of the Pink Panthers into a psychic counterthreat, expanding their protective shield beyond the confines of their physical "beat." Perhaps the most assertive "bashing" that the uniformed bodies of the Pink Panthers deliver is mnemonic. Their spectacular presence counters heterosexual culture's will not to recognize its own intense need to reign in a sexually pure environment.

While the rage of "Bash Back" responds to embodied and overt violence, Queer Nation's "Queer Nights Out" redress the more diffuse and implicit violence of sexual conventionality by mimicking the hackneyed forms of straight social life. Queer Nights Out are moments of radical desegregation with roots in Civil Rights-era lunch counter sit-ins; whereas the sixties sit-ins addressed legal segregation, these queer sorts confront customary segregation. Invading straight bars, for example, they stage a production of sentimentality and pleasure that broadcasts the ordinariness of the queer body. The banality of twenty-five same-sex couples making out in a bar, the silliness of a group of fags playing spin the bottle, efface the distance crucial to the ordinary pleasures straight society takes in the gay world. Neither informational nor particularly spectacular, Queer Nights Out demonstrate two ominous truths to heterosexual culture: (1) gay sexual identity is no longer a reliable foil for straightness; (2) what looked like bounded gay subcultural activity has itself become restless and improvisatory, taking its pleasures in a theater near you.

Queer Nights Out have also appropriated the model of the surprise attack, which the police have traditionally used to show gays and lesbians that even the existence of their subcultural spaces is contingent upon the goodwill of straights. Demonstrating that the boundedness of heterosexual spaces is also contingent upon the (enforced) willingness of gays to remain invisible, queers are thus using exhibitionism to make public space psychically unsafe for unexamined heterosexuality. In one report from the field, two lesbians were sighted sending a straight woman an oyster, adding a sapphic appetizer to the menu of happy-hour delights. The straight woman was not amused. Embarrassment was generated — the particular embarrassment liberals suffer when the sphere allotted to the tolerated exceeds the boundaries "we all agree upon." Manoeuvres such as this reveal that straight mating techniques, supposed to be "Absolutely Het," are sexual lures available to any brand of pleasure: "Sorry, you looked like a dyke to me." This political transgression of
“personal space” can even be used to deflect the violence it provokes. Confronted by a defensive and hostile drunk, a Queer Nation gayboy addresses the room: “Yeah, I had him last night, and he was terrible.”

In this place of erotic exchange, the army of lovers takes as its war strategies “some going-down and buttfucking and other forms of theatre.” The genitals become not just organs of erotic thanksgiving, but weapons of pleasure against their own oppression. These kinds of militantly erotic interventions take their most public form in the Queer Nation kiss-in, in which an official space such as a city plaza is transfused with the juices of unofficial enjoyment: embarrassment, pleasure, spectacle, longing, and accusation interarticulate to produce a public scandal that is, as the following section will reveal, Queer Nation’s specialty.

 hyperspace: “Try Me On, I’m Very You”

In its most postmodern moments, Queer Nation takes on a corporate strategy in order to exploit the psychic unboundedness of consumers who depend upon products to articulate, produce, and satisfy their desires. Queer Nation tactically uses the hyperspaces created by the corporeal trademark, the metropolitan parade, the shopping mall, print media, and, finally, advertising, to recognize and take advantage of the consumer’s pleasure in vicarious identification. In this guise, the group commandeers permeable sites, apparently apolitical spaces through which the public circulates in a pleasurable consensual exchange of bodies, products, identities, and information. Yet it abandons the conciliatory mode of, for instance, Kirk and Madsen’s plan to market “positive” (read “tolerable”) gay images to straight culture. Instead, it aims to produce a series of elaborate blue-light specials on the queer body. The Queer National corporate strategy—to reveal to the consumer desires he didn’t know he had, to make his identification with the product “homosexuality” both an unsettling and a pleasurable experience—makes consumer pleasure central to the transformation of public culture, thus linking the utopian promises of the commodity with those of the nation.

One particular celebrity oscillates between local/embodied and corporate/abstract sexual identification: the bootleg “Queer Bart” T-shirt produced by Queer Nation in the summer of 1990. Queer Bart reconfigures Matt Groening’s bratty white suburban “anykid,” Bart Simpson, into the New York gay clone: he wears an earring, his own Queer Nation T-shirt, and a pink triangle button. The balloon coming out of his mouth reads, “Get used to it, dude!” Like all bodies, Queer Bart’s body is a product that serves a number of functions. In the first place, he provides a counterexample to the apparent harmlessness of the suburban American generic body: Queer Nation’s Bart implicitly points a finger at another bootleg T-shirt on which Bart snarls, “Back off, faggot!” and at the heterosexuality that Regular Bart’s generic identity assumes. In the second place, the original Bart’s “cloneness,” when infected with an “exceptional” identity—Black Bart, Latino Bart, and so on—not only stages the ability of subcultures to fashion cultural insiderhood for their members but also reinscribes subcultural identity into mainstream style. The exuberant inflection of Bart Simpson as queer speaks to the pleasures of assuming an “official” normative identity, signified on the body, for those whom dominant culture consistently represents as exceptional.

Queer Nation’s reinvention of Bart’s body, which, precisely because it is a body, readily lends itself to any number of polymorphously perverse identities, graphically demonstrates that the commodity is a central means by which individuals tap into the collective experience of public desire. Queer Bart, himself a trademark, is a generic body stamped with Queer Nation’s own trademarked aesthetic, which then allows the consumer to publicly identify him/herself as a member of a trademarked “nation.” Thus, Bart embodies the nospaces we will discuss in the following paragraphs. His own unboundedness as a “commodity identity” exploits the way that the fantasy of “being” something else merges with the stereotype to confer an endlessly shifting series of identities upon the consumer’s body.

The genealogy of the Queer Bart strategy extends from the Gay Pride parades of the 1970s, when, for the first time, gay bodies organized into a visible public ritual. In addition to offering gays and lesbians an opportunity to experience their private identities in an “official” spectacle, the parades also offered flamboyant and ordinary homosexuality as something the heterosexual spectator could encounter without having to go “underground”—to drag shows or gay bars—for voyeuristic pleasure or casual sex. In the last twenty years, the representation of “gayness” in the Gay Pride parade has changed, for its marching population is no longer defined by sexual practice alone. Rather, the current politicization of gay issues has engendered broadly based alliances, such as that progressive “straights” can pass as “queer” in their collective political struggles. As a result, the Gay Pride parade no longer produces the ominous gust of an enormous closet door opening; its role in consolidating iden-
tity varies widely, depending on what kind of communication participants think the parade involves. While Gay Pride parades have not yet achieved the status in mainstream culture of, for instance, St. Patrick’s Day parades (in which people “go Irish for a day” by dressing in green), they have thus become pluralistic and inclusive, involving approval-seeking, self-consolidating, and saturnalian and transgressive moments of spectacle. Although Queer Nation marches in traditional Gay Pride parades, it has updated and complicated the strategy of the parade, recognizing that the planned, distanced, and ultimately contained nature of the form offers only momentary displacement of heterosexual norms: after all, one can choose not to go to a parade, or one can watch the scene go by without becoming even an imaginary participant.

In parades through urban American downtowns, Queer Nationals often chant, “We’re here, we’re queer, we’re not going shopping.” But shopping itself provides the form of a tactic when Queer Nation enters another context: the Queer Shopping Network of New York and the Suburban Homosexual Outreach Program (SHOP) of San Francisco have taken the relatively bounded spectacle of the urban pride parade to the ambient pleasures of the shopping mall. “Mall visibility actions” thus conjoin the spectacular lure of the parade with Hare Krishna-style “conversion” and “proselytizing” techniques. Stepping into malls in hair-gelled splendor, holding hands and handing out fliers, the queer auxiliaries produce an “invasion” which conveys a different message: “We’re here, we’re queer, you’re going shopping.”

These miniature parades transgress an erotically, socially, and economically complex space. Whereas patrons of the straight bar at least understand the bar’s function in terms of pleasure and desire, mall-goers invest in the shopping mall’s credentials as a “family” environment, an environment which “creates a nostalgic image of a clean, safe, legible town center.” In dressing up and stepping out queer, the Network uses the bodies of its members as billboards to create what Mary Ann Doane calls “the desire to desire.” As Queer Shoppers stare back, kiss, pose, they disrupt the anesthetized surface of the malls, exposing as sites of any number of explicitly sexualized exchanges — cruising, people watching, window-shopping, trying on outfits, purchasing commodities, and having anonymous sex.

The inscription of metropolitan sexuality in a safe space for suburban-style normative sexual repression is just one aspect of the Network’s critical pedagogy. In addition, mall actions exploit the utopian function of the mall, which connects information about commodities with sensual expressivity and which predicts that new erotic identities can be sutured to spectacular consuming bodies. The Queer Shopping Network understands the most banal of advertising strategies: sex sells. In this case, though, sex sells not substitutions for bodily pleasures — a car, a luxury scarf — but the capacity of the body itself to experience unofficial pleasures. While the Network appears to be merely handing out another commodity in the form of broadsides about homosexuality, its ironic awareness of itself as being on display links gay spectacle with the window displays that also entreat the buyers. Both say “buy me,” but the Queer Shopping Network tempts consumers with a commodity that, if they could recognize it, they already own: a sexually inflected and explicitly desiring body. Ultimately, the mall spectacle addresses the consumer’s own “perversion” desire to experience a different body and offers itself as the most stylish of the many attitudes on sale in the mall.

Queer Nation exploits the mall’s coupling of things and bodies by transgressively disclosing that this bounded, safe commercial space is also an information system where sexual norms and cultural identities are consolidated, thus linking it with Queer Nation’s final frontier: the media. As it enters the urban media cacophony, Queer Nation scatters original propaganda in the form of graffiti, wheat-pasted posters, and fliers into existing spaces of collective, anonymous discursive exchange. While the mall circulates and exchanges bodies, print media circulate and exchange information in the most disembodied of spaces. Queer Nation capitalizes on the abstract/informational apparatus of the media in a few ways, refunctioning its spaces for an ongoing “urban redecoration project” on behalf of gay visibility. First, it manipulates the power of modern media to create and disseminate cultural norms and other political propaganda: Queer Nation leeches, we might say, onto the media’s socializing function. Second, Queer Nation’s abundant interventions into sexual publicity playfully invoke and resist the lure of monumentality, frustrating the tendency of sexual subcultures to convert images of radical sexuality into new standards of transgression.

In addition to manufacturing its own information, Queer Nation’s mass mediation takes on a more ironic “Madison Avenue” mode, “queering” advertisements so that they become vehicles of protest against and arrogations of a media that renders queerness invisible, sanitary, or spectaculatively fetishized. More ambiguous than the tradition of political de-
facement from which it descends—feminist spray-painting of billboards with phrases like “this offends women,” for example—Queer Nation’s glossy pseudoadvertisements involve replication, exposure, and disruption of even the semiotic boundaries between gay and straight. The group’s parodies and reconstructions of mainstream ads inflect products with a sexuality and promote homosexuality as a product: they lay bare the “queerness” of the commodities that straight culture makes and buys, either translating it from its hidden form in the original or revealing and ameliorating its calculated erasure. In short, the most overtly commercial of Queer Nation’s campaigns, true to the American way, makes queer good by making goods queer.

One form this project takes is an “outing” of corporate economic interest in “market segments” with which corporations refuse to identify explicitly. The New York Gap series changes the final $ in the logo of stylish ads featuring gay, bisexual, and suspiciously polymorphous celebrities to a $ for the “insider,” these acts “out” the closeted gay and bisexual celebrities the Gap often uses as models. But the reconstructed billboards also address the company’s policy of using gay style to sell clothes without acknowledging debts to gay street style: style itself is “outed,” as are the straight urban consumers who learn that the clothes they wear signify “gay.”

Whereas the Gap ads confront both the closetedness of a corporation and the semiotic incoherence of straight consumer culture, another series addresses the class implications of advertising’s complicity in the national moral bankruptcy. A series of parody Lotto ads exposes the similarities and differences between the national betrayal of poor and of gay citizens. The “straight” versions of a series of advertisements for New York’s Lotto depict generic citizens of various assimilated genders and ethnicities, who voice their fantasies about sudden wealth underneath the caption “All You Need is a Dollar Bill and a Dream.” The ads conflated citizenship and purchase, suggesting that working-class or ethnic Americans can realize the American dream through spending money. One of Queer Nation’s parody ads shows an “ordinary citizen” in one of the frank, casual head-and-shoulders poses that characterize the real ads. The caption reads, “I’d start my own cigarette company and call it Fags.” The Queer Nation logo appears, along with the slogan “All You Need is a Three-Dollar Bill and a Dream.” Again, the ads link citizenship with capitalist gain, but the ironized American dream cliché also establishes the group’s resistance to a liberal “gay business” approach to social liber-

ation, in whose view capitalist legitimation neutralizes social marginality. Queer Nation recognizes that the three-dollar bill remains non-negotiable tender. The transformed caption reveals that the lottery’s fundamental promise does not hold true for the nation’s gay citizens in terms of the freedom to pursue sexual pleasure, which costs more than any jackpot or bank account has ever amassed.

In posing as a countercorporation, a “business” with its own logo, corporate identity, and ubiquity, Queer Nation seizes and dismantles the privileges of corporate anonymity. It steals the privilege that this anonymity protects, that of avoiding painful recrimination for its actions. As it peels the facade of corporate neutrality, Queer Nation reveals that businesses are people with political agendas, and that consumers are citizens to whom businesses are accountable for more than the quality of their specific products. Abstracting itself, Queer Nation embodies the corporation. The Lotto ad finally promises alternative to the capitalist dream machine: its Queer Nation logo, juxtaposed against the “All You Need is a Three-Dollar Bill and a Dream” caption, appeals to the consumer to invest in its own “corporate” identity.

The Queer Nation logo itself, then, becomes a mock twin to existing national corporate logos. Just as red, white, and blue “Buy U.S.A.” labels, yellow ribbons, and flag icons have, by commodifying patriotism, actually managed to strengthen it, so does the spread of Queer Nation’s merchandise and advertising expand its own territory of promises. Because Gap clothes and lottery fantasies confer identities as much as flag kitsch does, Queer Nation has the additional power to expose or transform the meaning of these and other commodities—not simply through the reapportionment that camp enacts on an individual level but through collective mimicry, replication, and invasion of the pseudoidentities generated by corporations, including the nation itself.

Queer Nation’s infusion of consumer space with a queer sensibility and its recognition of the potential for exploiting spaces of psychic and physical permeability are fundamental to its radical reconstitution of citizenship. For in the end, an individual’s understanding of himself as “American” and/or as “straight” involves parallel problems of consent and local control: both identities demand psychic and bodily discipline in exchange for the protection, security, and power these identities confer. If the official nation extracts public libidinal pleasure as the cost of political identity, queer citizenship confers the right to one’s own specific pleasures. In the final analysis, America, understood not as a geographic