“Late Seventies, Southern California, Punk Rock Kid”:
Queer Spaces, Counterpublics, and Tim Miller’s *Spilt Milk*

Colin Loeffler

SENIOR HONORS THESIS

Submitted In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements of the
*College Scholars Honors Program*
*North Central College*

May 12, 2014

Approved: ___________________________  Date: __________

*Thesis Director Signature*

Dr. Kelly Howe

Approved: ___________________________  Date: __________

*Second Reader Signature*

Dr. Sara Eaton
# Table of Contents

Abstract ................ 3  
Introduction .......... 4  

What is Queer and Who is Tim Miller? ........ 5  
Finding and Defining a Gay Male Counterpublic .......... 11  
Queer Space and the Attempts to Regulate It ........ 18  
Coming Out Into Queer Space ........ 31  
Finding a Counterpublic at the Theater ........ 41  

Selected Bibliography .......... 45
Abstract

As a result of an increase in popularity in the 1990s, queer solo performance has become a subject of academic consideration. This essay analyzes Tim Miller’s *Spilt Milk* using queer theory. *Spilt Milk*, first performed in 1994, describes an idealistic trip Miller took to San Francisco in the seventies. San Francisco seemed to Miller like a center of cultural revolution for queer people. The trip ends with disappointment, but it helps Miller shed some of the youthful naiveté with which he begins his journey. Using public-sphere theory, I analyze moments in the performance that illuminate what forms of queerness, if any, are allowable in public. Queer people often form what are called counterpublics to increase the representations of queerness allowable in public space. The essay examines the queer-positive communities that appear in the piece; I analyze how physical places in which queer-positive communities can represent themselves are a particular form of queer space. I conclude by discussing how Miller’s performance helps to establish the community he desires.
“By accident, you put
Your money in my
Machine (#4)
By accident, I put
My money in another
Machine (#6)
On purpose, I put
Your clothes in the
Empty machine full
Of water and no
Clothes

It was lonely.”

- Richard Brautigan, “San Francisco”

“To practice space is thus to repeat the joyful and silent experience of childhood; it is, in a place, to be other and to move toward the other.”

- Michel de Certeau, “Walking in the City”

Tim Miller's autobiographical solo performance Spilt Milk narrates a trip Miller took to San Francisco as a nineteen year old in 1978; he first performed the piece in 1987. Miller begins the performance describing a very particular set of goals and expectations he has for the city of San Francisco and his time there. These goals include getting laid and finding a group of fellow gay male radicals in which Miller can establish himself as a member. In this essay, I theorize this group of gay male radicals in which Miller can get laid as a particular counterpublic of which Miller desires to be a member. A counterpublic, as I define the term, is a group of individuals with a specific set of needs that are not met by texts that circulate in the mass public sphere.¹ I base my definition on the work of social theorist Michael Warner, author of the book Publics and Counterpublics. In Spilt Milk Miller longs for the cultural revolutions of the 1960s, and while cultural revolutions are of course still occurring, by 1978 they naturally look different from

¹ Texts that circulate in the mass public sphere are anything a person might see and receive information from—billboards, posters, television commercials, the television programs themselves. Note that the producer and consumer of a text in the public sphere are both unaware of specifically who the other is.
what they looked like in the sixties. Miller also encounters another young, gay man during the piece with whom he hopes to enter into some type of relationship; he and this man, Michael, perform a complicated coming out process when they meet. Michael and Miller’s performances both emphasize that Miller’s trip is part of his larger coming out process and shows how queer people have to constantly assert their identities in a world that consistently represents heteronormativity as normal behavior and the only behavior acceptable in public.

In the first section of this essay, I analyze broad notions of queerness and describe *Spilt Milk* as a performance. In each of the subsequent sections, I examine a specific moment or event in Miller’s piece as it relates to theories about queerness and spaces in which queer people can feel that their queer identity is valued.

**What is Queer and Who is Tim Miller?**

In this section I attempt to answer these questions for the purpose of this essay. Defining the term queer has been the project of several books, and defining a person in their entirety is, I believe, impossible. In *Spilt Milk*, Miller tells the story of his nineteen-year old self’s trip to San Francisco. Unlike in some of Miller’s other performances, it is Miller’s humor and storytelling abilities—not his physicality or his body—that drive this particular performance piece.² Miller invites the audience of this performance to laugh with him at the idealism and naiveté he experienced as a nineteen-year old. The performance encourages members of his audience to think about similar idealistic impulses they had when they were younger. The performance opens with Miller hitchhiking to San Francisco.³ He meets several people while hitchhiking, but he de-

---

² In his performance *My Queer Body*, a naked Miller sits on the lap of an audience member. Several people who write about queer solo performance have described this moment in various publications.

³ Although the performance is autobiographical, the Miller of the piece is not necessarily the “real” Tim Miller. In autobiographical solo performance, it is acceptable (perhaps even typical) to slightly alter details of the events that
scribes in detail his encounter with a hippie named Meadow who is heterosexual but comfortable with Miller’s self-identification as gay. Upon arriving in San Francisco, Miller ends up traveling to a commune run by a conservative Christian cult. He laughs at this situation—he is an open and proud gay man who ended up at the home of a conservative Christian organization—and the idealistic impulses that led him there. He is allowed to return to San Francisco, and when he arrives he meets another young gay man. He imagines himself and this man having sex and working together to change the world. In Miller’s imagination, both of these feats are rather easier than they tend to be in actual experience. Though the adult Miller who narrates the piece confirms for his audience that the desires to have sex and positively change the world are good desires to have, the narrator also encourages the audience to find humor in how a young person may believe these desires are easy to achieve. At the end of *Spilt Milk*, Miller describes how he learned of Harvey Milk’s death. Part of Miller’s original desire to go to San Francisco was the change Milk was making in the city. Miller’s experience of Milk’s death is personal, and because Harvey Milk was assassinated, Miller decides to move out of California.

In *Spilt Milk*, the actual cultural landscape of the San Francisco Miller enters differs from what he expects it will be. This difference occurs in part because there are structures in place to prevent queer counterpublics and spaces from forming and in part because a young and naive Miller cannot reconcile that the real counterpublics he encounters are different from the ones he previously imagined. The structures in place that prevent counterpublics from appearing include legislation that literally prevents queer spaces from developing. In his book *The Trouble with Normal*, Michael Warner discusses zoning laws in New York City that seek to eradicate queer actually occurred. If a performer does play with truth, often it is to make events more interesting or to help the piece fit together appropriately.
space; a large portion of the book is Warner’s analysis of what these laws mean for queer people and the spaces in which they can represent themselves. Warner describes:

These surreal scenes are among the effects of Mayor Rudy Giuliani’s new zoning law limiting ‘adult establishments,’ which the city began to enforce in the summer of 1998 after a series of court stays and challenges…. The law has already allowed the city to padlock dozens of stores and clubs, including a gay bookstore. But the law’s details contain many gray areas, and the resulting uncertainty and fear have a much wider, chilling effect than the closures (150).

This legislation can develop because members of the mass public fear that if a counterpublic for queer people emerged and began producing texts for use by its members, individuals who are not members of the counterpublic might see these texts as well. Some people with the ability to create discourse for the mass public who wish to stop the formation of queer counterpublics. These people often create discourse that suggests children might accidentally see texts intended for use by queer people if such texts were allowed to exist. The desire to protect children is often what prevents queer counterpublics from forming.

*Spilt Milk* stages disappointment. Miller is attempting to be an activist and to enter a queer counterpublic as a gay man, both for the first time. The disappointment he feels as a result of these endeavors demonstrates a result of the mass public not sufficiently providing discourse for queer people and activists to consume. Instead, Miller himself decides to create useful cultural artifacts for queer people and fellow activists, which is precisely what he does in his performance. Each time he performs pieces like *Spilt Milk*, Miller creates in the audience the queer counterpublic he looks for in the narrative of the performance, transforming the theater into queer space in the process. These performances allow him to stage issues such as the coming out
processes, which queer people benefit from seeing put into discourse, with minimal fear of immediate censorship by a consuming mass public. Because disappointment can be a particularly complicated feeling for queer people, this essay attempts to chart Miller’s performance of this feeling in Split Milk as well as what Miller’s feelings of disappointment demonstrate about him as a white, gay man.

It has been difficult to decide on the nomenclature to use in this writing. In some moments, I describe Miller as a “gay male,” and at other moments I describe him as “queer.” Queer studies is an academic movement whose definition can be ambiguous depending on the context. A queer ethos tends to assume that sexuality is a cultural construction and that, in a culture, a person’s sexuality is taken to imply certain additional things about their personality or way of being in the world that are not necessarily true. Prominent queer theorist and one of the earliest writers in queer studies Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes:

That’s one of the things that ‘queer’ can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically (“Queer” 8, original emphasis).

Under Sedgwick’s definition, a heterosexual person could identify as queer if her or his sexual habits were non-normative. Married couples who knowingly have affairs or heterosexuals who practice BDSM are examples of this type of queer person. Like the author of this essay, Tim Mil-

---

4 People who have the ability to regulate discourse have attempted to censor Miller’s performances. Perhaps most famously, the National Endowment for the Arts rescinded grants they had awarded to Miller and three other solo performers because of “lewd” content in their performances. It is not insignificant that three of these performers, including Miller, are queer and that all four of them discussed sex and sexuality in their performances. For an analysis of this incident and the subsequent legal process the performers went through to fight back, see Richard Meyer’s “‘Have You Heard the One about the Lesbian Who Goes to the Supreme Court?’: Holly Hughes and the Case Against Censorship.” An audience member in the theatre watching Miller perform, however, likely has little fear that that particular performance will suddenly be stopped midway through.
Loeffler is a gay, middle-class, white man. The appellation queer is often meant to acknowledge that a term like “gay” refers to just one of a person’s many identifications and experiences. Sedgwick continues:

[A] lot of the most exciting recent work around ‘queer’ spins the term outward along dimensions that can’t be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all: the ways that race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality criss-cross with these and other identity constituting, identity-fracturing discourses (8).5

Queer studies examines how a person’s identity shapes their experience of the world. My examination of queerness concerns how discourse for use by the mass public tends to assume that the person viewing the discourse is white, middle-class, and heterosexual.6 A person who self-identifies as queer likely has some aspect of her or his sexual identification which is different from the ideal user of public discourse; she or he also acknowledges that her or his sexuality interacts with other privileges and oppressions she or he experiences.

Much of my difficulty deciding whether to call Miller a “gay man” or “queer” arises from my consideration of for whom Miller creates his performances. In several moments, he addresses issues that affect the entire queer community: feelings of difference and the desire of heteronormative public discourse to remove any artifacts the queer community finds useful, for example. In some moments, however, the problems Miller describes feel particular to gay men, or even

---

5 “Queer and Now,” the essay from which this quotation is taken, was originally published in 1993. There is now a considerable amount of work within queer studies that does what Sedgwick describes in this quotation. See, for example, work by Gloria Anzaldúa, José Esteban Muñoz, or Roderick A. Ferguson. I personally consider these intersections with other identity categories an important part of queer studies.

6 Discourse for the mass public is also generally intended for consumption by men; see, for example, Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in which Mulvey argues the view a film provides for an audience is that of a male spectator. However, there are artifacts in the mass circulating public that are clearly intended for use by white, middle-class, heterosexual women—I think of tampon commercials and the film Magic Mike, for example. These artifacts, however problematic for the sexist assumptions they make about what these women desire, are not intended for male use.
more precisely, other white, middle-class, gay men. Steven Seidman describes how individuals who write about and contribute to gay male culture tend to assume the distinctions “white” and “middle-class” are just part of what it is to be a gay man, stating, “‘Gay’ signifies the experience of a white, middle-class, urban culture organized around sex, consumerism, and civil rights” (120). Seidman could be describing Miller, who does not claim to describe what it is like for gay men of color or gay men of a lower socioeconomic status than he is; Miller only claims to share his own experiences in an interesting way. However, in Miller’s identification as a “gay, middle-class, white man,” “gay” is the only status that hegemonic culture generally marks. Much like hegemonic culture assumes heterosexuality, it assumes whiteness, a status as middle- to upper-class, and it is created for consumption by men rather than by women. Racial theorist Richard Dyer warns about specific ways white people represent themselves and other white people that I wish to avoid in this essay. He notes:

   The invisibility of whiteness as a racial position in white (which is to say dominant) discourse is of a piece with its ubiquity… [F]or most of the time white people speak about nothing but white people, it’s just that we [sic] couch it in terms of ‘people’ in general (3).

There are aspects of Miller’s performance that relate to experiences and feelings with which people other than white, middle-class, gay men can identity; because he is white, however, there is a potential to view him as a representative of gay male culture in a way that would not happen if he were a person of color. If the term “gay man” already implies certain additional identifications along the lines of class and race, perhaps the term queer is more useful because “queer” is a broad term that implies less about the person who uses it as an appellation upon himself or herself. That term is not without flaws either, however, as Miller really does not describe what it is
like, for example, for an African-American gay woman, who also may use the term queer to describe herself. Sedgwick notes, “anyone’s use of ‘queer’ about themselves means differently from their use of it about someone else” (9). In the essay, I use “queer” when what I or Miller describe could likely be usable by many members of that community; I use what I view as the more specific “gay male” when Miller or I discuss issues that are likely only specific to gay men.

**Finding and Defining a Gay Male Counterpublic**

One of the primary reasons Miller travels to San Francisco is to meet gay men like himself; he feels dissatisfied with people in his hometown because he cannot discuss his sexual identity the way he wants to do with them. Groups like the one Miller seeks, which form because their members need something they cannot get from mainstream discourse, have particular characteristics as a result of their separation from the mass public. I attempt to parse out some of these characteristics in this section of the essay. Before his trip, San Francisco represents for Miller a city of political and queer freedom because of his awareness of and nostalgia for previous cultural revolutions. Once he arrives in San Francisco, he believes he will meet other politically-minded people and fellow gay men. He states, "I had bought an LP of Allen Ginsberg reading 'Howl' in San Francisco... I slurped up this compelling queer vision of anarchic, literary, and politicized sex. Sign me up. I'm heading for San Francisco" (88). A desire to be part of the cultural revolutions of the sixties also inspires the trip. Miller notes:

I had missed out on the hippie/antiwar/cultural revolution by about ten years… I had even been cheated out of the juiciest period of socially transgressive gay political action. I wish I had gotten to be arrested in those early Gay Liberation Front actions. Now, in 1978, it felt like all that was left were the table scraps of disco, Izod shirts, and the dreary assimilationist mix of lobbying and partying. (88-89)
Miller is looking to be part of something bigger than himself--something unavailable to him in Whittier, the white, conservative suburb of Los Angeles in which he has lived his entire life at the moment in his life when the piece takes place. He wants to be part of a group of like-minded individuals who are unsatisfied with the mainstream. In other words, he wants to be part of a counterpublic.

According to Michael Warner, “[p]ublics are essentially intertextual frameworks for understanding texts against an organized background of the circulation of other texts, all interwoven not just by citational references but by the incorporation of a reflexive circulatory field in the mode of address and consumption” (Publics 16). An intellectual public is relatively simple to imagine from this definition: scholars of eighteenth-century literature, for example, are familiar with the literary texts they analyze and the secondary texts that aid in this analysis. All of these texts can be read in circulation with one another. Note that to be part of a public, one does not have to be familiar with every single text circulating in that public. Even language that implies there is a fixed amount of texts circulating in a public is a sort of fallacy, since this language implies there is some sort of stopping-point to the texts within a public. New texts circulate within publics almost constantly. To be in effect part of a public, an individual only has to be familiar with enough texts circulating in a public to be able to read them with and against one another. By being familiar with and discussing these texts, an individual is an active member of a public—participating in its creation and maintenance.

I have already in this essay hinted at the existence of a mass public that circulates discourse which is supposedly viewable by a significant number of people. In discourse, we often speak of this mass public as the public. The public is an ambiguously defined entity often elided
with a nationality or people in general. The texts that constitute the public include film and television, the news media, and various articles accessible on the internet. Facebook is a particularly fascinating site for the circulation of contemporary public texts—by “sharing” the texts we read we literally and immediately contribute to their circulation and in doing so continue to create and constitute the public. The concept of this singular public is problematic, as Warner describes:

[T]he public, as a people, is thought to include everyone within the field in question. This sense of totality is brought out by speaking of the public, even though to speak of a national public implies that others exist; there must be as many publics as polities, but whenever one is addressed as the public, the others are assumed not to matter (65-66, original emphasis).

Discourse that circulates in the public assumes that everyone it addresses desires to be part of it, or at least that its discourse is understandable, usable, or at least viewable by all of its members. The assumed homogeneity of such an extensive group of people is obviously a fiction.

Because of the public’s fictitious homogeneity, addressing the public must require the removal or masking of one’s personhood. Indeed, as Warner notes, “[t]o be properly public require[s] that one rise above, or set aside, one’s private interests and expressive nature” (40). Consider, for example, the leader of a local chapter of an organization like ACT UP. She or he is at once a member of the public, the leader of the public of that particular chapter of ACT UP, and a member of the public of the larger ACT UP organization. She or he can easily create discourse to circulate in her or his chapter of ACT UP. In doing so, however, she or he must attempt to make the discourse usable to the majority of members in that public; why circulate it otherwise? To be

---

7 I, like Warner, italicize “the” when discussing this public to avoid instances in which I must use “the” as an article to describe “public” as a noun.
8 ACT UP, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, is an activist organization. They work to improve the lives of people living with AIDS and to increase legislation and medical research to help fight the disease.
a sufficient discourse creator for a homogeneous public, an individual cannot simultaneously exist in the private sphere; because people have private lives, those allowed to speak in public more sufficiently address individuals similar to themselves. The leader of this fictitious chapter of ACT UP also has some agency to create discourse for the public of the larger ACT UP organization—say her or his chapter holds an event that is notably successful, for example. However, being the leader of this chapter does not significantly give this person the ability to create discourse for use by the public. Though ACT UP as an organization does create discourse that is meant for use by members of the public who are not involved with its activities, those with power in the public are able to limit the placement and availability of the discourse ACT UP puts into the public sphere. The public is regulated space. Discourse to the public inevitably does not include all of its supposed members. Those who are not adequately addressed by the public must either conform to become its ideal member or create their own form of public that addresses them as they are.9

Because discourse in the public is insufficient for some people, individuals who are left out of the public create a counterpublic, which is inherently subversive because it resists the transformation of its members that the public desires. Warner’s description of the members of a counterpublic is a bit more extreme; he writes, “[S]ome publics are defined by their tension with a larger public. Their participants are marked off from persons or citizens in general” (56). The public’s inability to address these individuals marks them as nonbeings, even though it is the public’s discourse that failed to create texts and artifacts that are usable and interesting to queer

---

9 If this ability of discourse circulating in the public seems extreme, or appears to grant the public too much power, consider that there is “an asymmetrical nature of mass culture, which makes it easier for those with capital or power to distribute their views but harder for marginal voices to talk back” (Warner Publics 49). Additionally, as Warner notes elsewhere, “A public is a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself… It exists by virtue of being addressed” (67, original emphasis). Because discourse is the sole organizer of a public, it must be within this discourse that those in power reinforce their hegemony.
people. Because of their dissatisfaction with *the* public, queer people’s status as marked nonbe-
ings causes them to create a counterpublic to circulate discourse in which certain aspects of their
identity no longer mark them—these aspects of identity are taken as a norm in that counterpublic
even though they are not the norm in *the* public. Typically, a counterpublic establishes what
identification is normative in that counterpublic by changing what type of discourse is and is not
allowable. Warner describes:

> A counterpublic, against the background of the public sphere, enables a horizon of
> opinion and exchange; its exchanges remain distinct from authority and can have
> a critical relation to power; its extent is in principle indefinite, because it is not
> based on a precise demography but mediated by print, theater [*sic*], diffuse net-
> works of talk, commerce, and the like. (56-57)

*The* public is astutely anxious regarding counterpublics, which, because they are at times subal-
tern, can challenge *the* public’s hegemony. Consider, for example, a gay neighborhood like
Boystown in Chicago. Rainbow flags on streetlights and telephone poles indicate the boundaries
of Boystown and the rest of the city. These flags are useful for queer people to whom the flags
indicate that Boystown is a space created for their use. However, the flags also indicate to mem-
ers of *the* public who are not members of a queer counterpublic that Boystown is not for them,
and if they venture into Boystown, they might see a lot more than just rainbow flags. The most
active streets in Boystown tend to be free of representations of, for example, queer sex, which
queer people would benefit seeing represented in public. *The* public uses its powers of discourse,
typically its legislative powers, which are rarely available to a counterpublic, to silence or even
disband subaltern counterpublics who members of *the* public view as a threat. For example, the
National Endowment for the Arts rescinded funding from Miller and three other solo perfor-
mane artists whose work deals with sexuality. By the late 1980s, when his money was rescinded, Miller had found a counterpublic in which he had become a member. However, the nineteen year old Miller in *Spilt Milk* is still looking for his counterpublic.

Miller specifically seeks an intellectual, politically-conscious, and gay male counterpublic, and San Francisco appears to be the city in which he can do so. Miller is aware of the strong presence of a gay male counterpublic in the city of San Francisco, and it is a counterpublic of which he hopes to become a member. His love of Ginsberg’s “Howl” and the relationship Miller perceives between San Francisco and the poem demonstrate his search for the intellectual in this city. His awareness of James Joyce, which becomes clear when he references *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* later in the performance, is yet another example of Miller’s intellectualism, if his witty and compelling writing is insufficient evidence. Miller wants to be part of a protest culture that formerly existed in San Francisco, or at least revive it somehow. Additionally, Miller’s inability to find validation for his identity as a gay man in his hometown is in part what inspires this trip. His identity upsets his parents, and his boyfriend David fails to engage Miller in any intellectually or sexually significant way. Because of San Francisco’s urban environment and history of cultural revolutions, the nineteen year old Miller believes he is more likely to find the counterpublic he is seeking in San Francisco than in his hometown of Whittier.

The search for his counterpublic will be more complicated than Miller anticipates. Miller believes he has found at least his political counterpublic when he meets two individuals on the street who offer him the chance to go to a "utopian" farm. Jennie, the girl who pitches the farm to Miller, states, “[w]e’re from the Creative Community Project, a progressive forward-looking

---

10 See n. 4
11 In the 1970s, Miller would not have stated that he was looking for a *queer* counterpublic—that term had not yet been re-appropriated from its use as a derogatory term for gay people.
communal organization working toward a new world order... We have a great teacher who shows us that humans can love one another” (93). The pitch entices Miller; he is progressive and forward thinking, and he too believes that humans are capable of loving one another. Even at this moment, however, Miller has some ambivalence about the farm, and his script provides hints that this organization is not what it initially appears to be. He writes, "At first I had actually thought Jennie and her colleague were Stalinists . . . There was something about their highly rehearsed encyclopedia-salesman presentation that smelled a little like spoiled yogurt cultures, though" (93-94). Even with this sour smell in his nostrils, Miller decides to go with Jennie and her colleague to the farm. It is perhaps his naiveté surrounding San Francisco and his longing to experience the cultural revolutions of the past that motivate his decision. "[W]asn't this the kind of thing that's supposed to happen your first ten minutes in San Francisco?" Miller asks his audience (94). The approach by individuals who appear to share Miller's political views confirms his idealistic opinion of San Francisco, though his subsequent experiences with the Moonies will in part de-affirm it.12

Miller’s experience teaches him to be more discerning in his search for a useful gay male counterpublic. Though he finds a counterpublic, it is a conservative, Christian one. Miller gets on a bus bound for the farm. The bus contains Jennie, her colleague, and several other young people heading to the Creative Community Project for the first time. Once he arrives at the Creative Community Project, it quickly becomes clear that Miller has not found the counterpublic he was looking for. The leaders at the farm require him to attend a variety of lectures and activities. Miller recounts one lecture:

12 The Moonies were a conservative Christian cult led by their prophet Harold Moon. They called themselves the “Unification Church.” They were active in Northern California in the 1970s. There are multiple accounts of young people like Miller getting taken to farms similar to the one he describes and getting brainwashed into believing in the cult’s ultra-conservative values. See, for example, Steven Hassan’s article, “I was a Moonie cult leader.”
[T]he instructor tried to explain to us everything we needed to know: the function of good and bad in the universe; the ultimate evil of communism; how man and women could be happy and complete only thorough the union of heterosexual marriage.

'You see,' he said with a flourish of his stub of white chalk, 'it is clear from this irrefutable interpretation of the Book of Revelations in the Bible that the second coming of Jesus Christ can only occur in South Korea!'

I grew more skeptical. (97)

The group Miller has found in the Creative Community Project is almost the direct opposite of the counterpublic for which he is searching. This public's circulating texts include the Bible along with wildly conservative methods for its interpretation. Miller experiences disappointment. Though there are gay male counterpublics, the search for such a group is more difficult than Miller assumed it would be. Miller experiences a specific form of disappointment that many queer people also experience. Whereas it is relatively easy for heterosexual people with normative sexualities to find people like themselves in public spaces, it is much more difficult for queer people to do so.

**Queer Space and the Attempts to Regulate It**

The farm led by the Creative Community Project was not a space in which Miller could be public about his sexuality. However, like many spaces for queer people, the farm was separate from a larger city. Queer counterpublics tend to be confined to particular areas within public space. If those in power can keep representations of queerness in certain areas only, it is less likely that someone who should not see these representations will. The existence of spaces in which queer counterpublics can represent themselves is still contentious, however. Miller soon
learns that he should have been looking in queer spaces if he wanted to find a queer counterpub-
lic. After his experience with the Moonies, Miller hitchhikes back to San Francisco and travels to
the house where he expects to stay. After he relates his story, one of his friend's housemates
notes, "'Hon, you just got swept up by the Moonies. Only an idiot would fall for the oldest scam
on Market Street" (102). Miller is shocked. He writes, "The Moonies! How could that be?... The
Moonies seduced green suburban kids, not hip sharpies like me" (102). Miller, who has at this
point spent barely any time in San Francisco, is very much a "green suburban kid," but like many
“green suburban kids” who travel to a big city on their own for the first time, he expects himself
to be a "hip sharpie." The overconfidence in this statement ironically reflects Miller’s naïveté.
Shortly after this exclamation, Miller begins to realize how silly some of his thoughts were when
he began the trip. He states:

I felt depressed. Disillusioned. What had I expected? What did I want? I think
what I really wanted was to have Allen Ginsberg come bursting out of the City
Lights bookstore, give me a big hug, and say, ’Tim! You made it! How ’bout a
cappuccino?’ (103)

Miller had idealized San Francisco at the beginning of his trip and must accept at this moment in
the piece that the reality of San Francisco does not match his expectations. Miller’s experience
with the Moonies reminds him of his unimportance to the city. Allen Ginsberg did not emerge
from a bookstore to greet Miller; day-to-day life in San Francisco would continue whether or not
Miller was there. The public is not a thinking or feeling entity; it is a cultural phenomenon.
Though the public depends on its members to constantly circulate its discourse so that it contin-
ues to exist, it cannot care if one of its members is participating in it or not because it does not
have thought or emotions.
Because a counterpublic is significantly smaller than the public, Miller wants to be part of a counterpublic to validate his trip to San Francisco. He at least saw an example of a queer counterpublic on his way out of San Francisco with the Moonies. Miller describes his view of this group of individuals:

I saw dozens of gay men heading into their new neighborhood, laughing and holding hands with each other as they crossed in front of the bus. They looked so bright and life-filled walking past me, almost a commercial for homosexuality.

(94-95)

As a queer counterpublic, these men likely owe their existence and safety to the gay liberation movement Miller longs for earlier in his piece; it was because of these movements that Miller wanted to travel to San Francisco at all. Of course, the safety of this counterpublic is always in question. Later in the performance, Miller discovers some disturbing information regarding his friend Neal, with whom he was originally planning on staying. Miller states, "[Neal's] housemates explained to me that Neal had been arrested for drug dealing and back-alley blow jobs off Polk Street" (102). That Neal was participating in this sex act in a back-alley indicates that it was away from a public space in which it was likely someone might see it.\(^{13}\) Instead, a police officer who knew that the alley was a space in which gay men sometimes engaged in sex acts likely patrolled the area with the specific intention of catching these men in action; it is difficult to believe a police officer found Neal and the other man unless she or he was actively looking for them. Even though queer people should be allowed to represent themselves in this space, there are always measures in place to prevent them from doing so.

\(^{13}\) I use the verb “participates” because it is unclear if Neal was giving or receiving the blow job.
Positive spaces for gay men, such as the street scene Miller describes, have become prevalent in major cities in the contemporary United States. Warner describes these counterpublics as they manifest themselves in New York City, but his analyses of Christopher Street and Chelsea apply to similar neighborhoods in other US cities. Warner, along with Lauren Berlant, believes these gay male counterpublics tend to form around sex; the two of them write, “Gay men have come to take for granted the availability of explicit sexual materials, theaters, and clubs. That is how they have learned to find each other, to map a commonly accessible world, to construct the architecture of queer space in a homophobic environment” (Berlant & Warner 191). The ability of the gay men Miller describes to be public regarding their sexualities indicates that there is something special about the area of San Francisco in which Miller first saw them. Although it is unfortunate that gay men need a special area in which to be public about their sexualities, these gay men are successfully subverting the hegemonic public sphere. Additionally, Judith Halberstam expands Berlant and Warner’s use of the term “queer space.” In her work, “[q]ueer space’ refers to the place-making practices within postmodernism in which queer people engage and it also describes the new understandings of space enabled by the production of queer counterpublics” (6).14 Queer people have the ability to make new unique spaces that contrast with traditional space. The publicness of sex in gay male spaces contrasts with the repression of sexual discourse in hegemonic public space.15 That queer spaces represent sex publicly is only one as-

---

14 Halberstam now publishes under the name J. Jack Halberstam. In a Queer Time and Place was published when J. Jack was still publishing as Judith. I use Judith for citational consistency—someone looking for the volume would find it under the name “Judith Halberstam.” I will also use third-person feminine pronouns to refer to Halberstam; her blog is deliberately ambiguous regarding which pronouns she desires others to use when describing her, and I prefer to keep these pronouns consistent with the name I use to cite her text.

15 Those with power in the public tend to repress any sexual discourse, but the repression of non-heterosexual discourse is more aggressive. Gay male counterpublics typically only concern themselves with the lack of discourse about gay male sexuality, but this is also the discourse that members of these counterpublics can use most easily.
pect of their existence, but it tends to be this aspect that those with the power to regulate public circulating discourse find the most fault.

Interestingly, in the street scene Miller describes, the actual gay men are the only artifact that indicates to Miller that the scene is queer space at all. Even though it is queer space, it is without queer iconography. Those who do have the power to regulate public circulating discourse feel compelled to regulate queer space because the relationship between queer space and hegemonic public space is more than just binary. Halberstam continues

[F]irst,… oppositional cultures… are not symmetrical to the authority they oppose; second,… the relations between sexuality and time and space provide immense insight into the flows of power and subversion within postmodernism; and finally,… queers use space and time in ways that challenge conventional logics of development, maturity, adulthood, and responsibility (13).

Queer space is more subversive than merely being an exact opposite of hegemonic public space. If queer space did oppose hegemonic public space so directly, there would be no effective way for the discourses of the public and queer counterpublics to circulate within each other as they would literally have no common ground.

Instead, queer space is different from hegemonic public space, just as queer spaces can also be different from one another. When a queer counterpublic can establish itself in a permanent or at least semi-permanent location, it creates queer space; the ability to create this space is itself a subversive act that implicates the queers who create it in an ongoing challenge to hegemonic authority. In regards to some queer spaces, Warner notes, “[i]n those circles where queerness has been most cultivated, the ground rule is that one doesn’t pretend to be above the indignity of sex” (Warner Trouble 35, original emphasis). While Warner is correct, plenty of other les-
bian and gay circles construct their legitimacy by pretending that individuals in them are above the indignity of sex, often because they want to be part of the public rather than a lesbian or gay counterpublic. Consider the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), an organization that fights for gay marriage. In *The Trouble with Normal*, Warner discusses marriage as a heteronormative institution that reinforces gender roles and conservative values, and several queer theorists have described the HRC as a group that encourages lesbians and gay men to construct their legitimacy by being more like heterosexuals in the hegemonic mass public. In an article discussing techniques participants in the gay marriage debate use to construct their arguments, Carol M. Liebler, Joseph Schwartz, and Todd Harper note that organizations like the HRC typically frame these debates by attempting to appear as much like members of the hegemony as possible. They quote from Schwartz’s master’s thesis:

Schwartz (2005) argues similarly in his analysis of the framing of same-sex marriage, as the HRC’s emphasis on same-sex marriage seems to ‘be tacitly privileging heterosexuality and reinforcing heteronormative ideas… despite its progressive agenda, in many ways, the group didn’t try to challenge society to accept people different from the majority; rather, it asked its membership to emulate the majority’ (656).

The HRC portrays lesbians and gay men as a sort of heterosexual in disguise; according to the HRC the only difference between lesbians and gay men and heterosexuals is that lesbians and gay men are attracted to people of the same sex. The HRC barely acknowledges that lesbians and gay men have sexual impulses. Miller is very consciously looking for a group that does not try to emulate heterosexuality, but instead one in which each individual’s performance of her or his sexuality can be however she or he feels most comfortable doing so.
Challenging hegemony is not easy and rarely occurs without pushback from the challenged hegemonic culture. Miller’s friend Neal’s arrest, with whom Miller was originally going to stay, for giving back-alley blowjobs is evidence of this pushback. If Neal really participated in these blowjobs in a “back-alley,” it is difficult to imagine that he and the person with whom he was engaging in the blow job were actually disturbing anyone. Instead, their act of being gay in “public space” was enough for hegemonic authority figures to use their power to put an end to the relatively harmless action. Warner describes the problems the public has with these types of situations: “[T]o challenge the norms of straight culture in public is to disturb deep and unwritten rules about the kinds of behavior and eroticism that are appropriate to the public” (Warner Publics 25). The problem with queer space is that it has to exist within the larger public space and, according to those with power in the public, must subscribe to the rules of public space. Paradoxically, the rules that describe what is allowable in public space contribute to why queer people desire to create queer space at all.

Miller comes to San Francisco to find an area where his sexuality does not mark him; he wants an area in which queerness, rather than straightness, is assumed. This desire is why queer people create queer space In the public, “[s]traight people can see a certain version of their straightness reflected back everywhere, from toothpaste ads to epic poems, and although they often rebel against the resulting banality of their sexual lives, they also profit from the way they seem no more sexually noticeable than anyone else” (Warner Trouble 23). Queer people do not have this luxury. The same artifacts that reinforce the normality of heterosexuality reinforce the corresponding abnormality of queer sexualities.¹⁶ When queer people attempt to create public

---

¹⁶ Heterosexual people with non-normative sexualities likely experience some related estrangement from cultural artifacts surrounding sex, but the heterosexual portion of their sexuality is still reinforced. If the non-normative sex-
artifacts that reinforce the normality of their sexual identity, they are accused of contaminating public space. If and when conservative heterosexuals enter queer space (there are no rules preventing them from doing so), the conservative heterosexuals insist that the problem is with homosexuals who were not bothering anyone. Public space does not tolerate the presence of queer space; the public does not tolerate counterpublics.¹⁷

The happy gay men Miller observes on his bus out of San Francisco create a situation in which male homosexuality is normal, within the queer space of their San Francisco neighborhood. Part of the public’s desire to minimize the presence of queer counterpublics stems from the public’s unease at the publicness of sex within queer counterpublics. The making public of sex is an effect of some queer people’s desire to maintain a space in which her or his sexual identity can be unmarked. Queer space takes sex outside the married, heterosexual bedroom and puts it on display in the street. Those who defend the privacy of married, heterosexual sex often champion its “traditional” status, but, as Berlant and Warner note, “Nonstandard intimacies would seem less criminal and less fleeting if, as used to be the case, normal intimacies included everything from consorts to courtiers, friends, amours, associates, and co-conspirators. Along with the sex it legitimates, intimacy has been privatized” (199). Privatizing intimacy conveniently prevents those with nonstandard intimacies from finding one another—if these people cannot discuss their sex in public, how can they find one another to engage in sex acts? Preventing non-standard sex acts is a large part of the conservative, hegemonizing desire to remove sex from the public sphere.

¹⁷ When the public does tolerate counterpublics, it typically co-opts these counterpublics into the public in some form. Dick Hebdige’s Subculture: The Meaning of Style discusses what happens when counterpublics (Hebdige’s word is “subcultures”) are co-opted into mainstream culture. Hebdige’s book provides a case study of how mainstream culture appropriated elements of British punk culture during the 1970s.
Miller’s conversation with Meadow, the hippie with whom Miller hitches a ride at the beginning of his narrative, provides an example of for whom public space is regulated. Miller and Meadow discuss lefty politics. Their conversation contains several curious exchanges. When discussing why the government needs to shut down nuclear power plants, Meadow states, “We have to fight nuclear power so we can preserve this for our children. I mean my children” (91). Meadow’s speech purposely draws attention to the importance of protecting the world “for the children.” The world must improve in order to be better for the needs of children in the future. The speech is designed for a homogeneous heterosexual audience, particularly since the piece occurs in the 1970s and there was at that time little to no hope for open homosexuals to care for children as parents or guardians. The speech would be effective to its intended audience because texts that circulate in public discourse—sitcoms, billboards, etc.—teach us that the protection of especially our own children should be one of our desires, if not our primary desire. They are our future, after all.

Meadow attempts to provide Miller with discourse about why we should protect children from the dangers of nuclear power plants. Often, rather than trying to protect children from nuclear power plants, people who regulate discourse attempt to prevent children from knowledge or discourse about sex. This desire to protect children is an important tool for not allowing queer people to represent themselves in public space. When “protecting the children” appears as the desire from which conservative lawmakers act, it justifies their actions. i.e. “You can’t have a sex store there; what if the children see it?” It does not matter if the area is only frequented by gay men and that children will likely never see it. But what if children did see it? Children have to learn about sex someday. The removal of discourse about sex from the public stems from the omnipresent knowledge that children do have to learn about sex someday. Adults prefer to keep
this knowledge from children for as long as possible. Public spaces often enact their regulator’s desire to protect children. This regulation takes the form of the removal of any artifacts that may let children know that unmarried people have sex; sometimes this sex is not heterosexual nor in the missionary position. Somehow the people who undertake this “cleaning” believe that eradicating textual evidence of these acts eradicates the acts themselves. When people who regulate discourse confuse the artifact and the action and remove discourse about sex from the public, it only has the effect of making sexual acts more dangerous, particularly in the wake of the AIDS crisis. It is important that queer people be able to represent their sex acts in discourse that circulates in some type of public so that these sex acts can be safer. Even more broadly, it is important that queer people be able to circulate discourse that is useful to them.

Miller’s interaction with Meadow emphasizes Miller’s own inability to reproduce, at least within the confines of the heterosexual matrix. Although people with the power to do so often regulate discourse for queer people in the name of children, there are often many obstacles to queer people raising or even interacting with children. As Lauren Berlant describes, “gay subjects are excluded from the privileges of procreation, of family, [and] of the public fantasy that circulates through these institutions” (152-153). Public discourse tells queer people that they should want to have children and contribute to the futurity of our society. At the same time public practice does not allow queer people any simple options to have children, particularly at the historical moment in which Miller’s performance takes place.

---

18 Of the two most typical options for queer people to have children, surrogacy is expensive and comes with its own cultural stigmas, while, because of heterosexism within the bureaucracy of adoption agencies, adoption for queer people can be extremely difficult.
19 Discourse that circulates in the public reinforces that everyone should want to have children, and queer people are part of this everyone, even when obstacles bar them from fulfilling the want discourse tells them they should have.
Once Meadow realizes Miller will likely never have children, the group on which Meadow’s speech depends, Meadow cannot continue with his advertisement. Discourse that encourages individuals to protect and care for children is ubiquitous to the point that people depend on it for other arguments and ideologies. Miller and Meadow’s conversation turns to a lull and Miller does not describe any more of it in his performance. It is fortunate that Miller agrees with him at this moment because Meadow appears out of things to say. Arguments of protection almost invariably return to the children; children are an excellent representation of the future. Several groups with the goal of “protecting” society try to use a specific, real child in their propaganda. Not only do they have a real person whom they are trying to protect; this person is a child who “has a long life ahead of her or him.”

Speeches like Meadow’s highlight that adults are expected to have and care for children; Meadow makes the speech before even considering that Miller, who Meadow already knows is gay, cannot easily have children. The public desire for futurity sets up as a goal something at which queer people fail. There are no easy ways for queer people to have children, and any avenues for sterile heterosexuals to have children remain closed for homosexuals. This paradox may contribute to internalized homophobia in the homosexual, who may feel that she or he fails at contributing effectively to society. Instead, this homosexual is forced to see repeated images of the benefits and beauty of a futurity from which she or he is absent. A lot of queer people are raising children in the contemporary world, either via adoption, surrogacy, or children from a previous heterosexual relationship. However, avenues like adoption remain difficult for queer people of color, and both adoption and surrogacy require a great deal of capital. Despite their

---

20 Internalized homophobia is often a manifestation of this feeling from various causes.
complicated relationship to the protection of children, it remains difficult for many queer people to care for children if they wanted to.

Meadow attempts to save his own speech by noting that his children still need protection from nuclear power plants. Miller should want to help end nuclear power to protect someone else’s children. Even with the difficulties surrounding queer people having children, queer people are expected to contribute to the protection of children, who represent the yet untainted future of the public. Lauren Berlant theorizes that the children public discourse seeks to protect take the aggregate form of an idealized little girl who has not yet learned about sex. Berlant describes:

The little girl stands… as a condensation of many (infantile) citizenship fantasies. It is in her name as future citizen that state and federal governments have long policed morality around sex and other transgressive representation; the psychological and political vulnerability she represents has provided a model for other struggles to transform minority experience in the United States. (Berlant 58-59)

Because of the desire to protect children, there are serious limits on what public discourse allows itself to represent and what members of the public allow and want to see public discourse represent. There is a particular fear that public discourse will teach children about sex, or worse, sex for something other than reproduction. If queer populations are allowed to represent themselves in public discourse, children might accidentally see this discourse. The fantasy surrounding the disaster of a child seeing artifacts of (non-normative) sex in public always focuses on the child’s inability to handle this information. This fantasy highlights the fictionality of this child; children have to learn about sex at some point, so the mythical child who accidentally sees sexual discourse, like a real child, should be able to handle it. Perhaps the desire to keep sex out of public

---

21 Queer populations do not specifically intend for children to see this discourse either.
discourse reflects hegemonic culture’s larger fear, and one that it desperately desires to keep away from children: there are people out there different from us who are living their lives contentedly. National culture in the United States seems particularly afraid of finding out that others are living their lives perfectly successfully without heteronormative US American values.

Meadow can have children and imagine his legacy continuing into the future; the public provides discourse that imagines Miller cannot do so. The desire to protect the ideal infantile citizen has more consequences than the immediate desire to keep sexual discourse out of the public sphere. In his book *No Future*, Lee Edelman examines the relationship between homosexuals and society’s reproductive futurity. Edelman continues Berlant’s analysis of the infantile citizen to assist him in making his point. Far from being an event that takes place only right now, the prevention of sexual discourse in public is a continuous process. Edelman describes:

> That figural Child alone embodies the citizen as an ideal, entitled to claim full rights to its future share in the nation’s good, though always at the cost of limiting the rights ‘real’ citizens are allowed. For the social order exists to preserve for this universalized subject, this fantasmatic Child, a notational freedom more highly valued than the actuality of freedom itself, which might, after all, put at risk the Child to whom such a freedom falls due. (11)

This figural child is never supposed to grow up. Those in power must continually protect her from representations of sex in public discourse by keeping any representations out of public discourse. If she learns about sex, she will grow up. The infantile citizen’s permanent status as a child emphasizes her unreality; real children grow up and learn about sex. In fact, children have to learn about sex in order to have their own children and continue to contribute to the potential for futurity in society. By not having an easy way to contribute to society’s reproductive futurity,
queer people remind other members of the public that the presence of children alone does not mean we are working towards a perfect future.

When Meadow the hippie interacts with Miller, Miller shows Meadow that society does not necessarily have a perfectible future. Miller forces Meadow to consider, “Why should we stop nuclear power plants right now?” Meadow wants a perfect future with no nuclear power plants, but the presence of a queer person reminds him this future is likely unobtainable. Heterosexual people can pretend that they are working towards a perfect future that one day their children’s children’s children’s etc… can enjoy. The presence of queer people reminds heterosexual people that a utopian future is unobtainable. Similarly, because Miller cannot have children as a gay man in the 1970s, Miller reminds Meadow that the future world Meadow seeks, in which there are no nuclear power plants, is likely a fiction.

**Coming Out into Queer Space**

Miller makes one final attempt in *Spilt Milk* to find queer space. Though he is ultimately unsuccessful, he does get to practice the coming out process. While spending the day on the beach in San Francisco, Miller encounters a gay man named Michael to whom he is attracted. Miller notices Michael reading James Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Michael notices Miller looking at his book and notes, “I’m taking a class on Joyce. We’re starting with the easy one. Have you read *Portrait*?” (106). Miller, with wit typical of his writing, states, “I was tempted to say that I had lived it” (106). Joyce’s novel describes the early life of Stephen Dedalus, an intelligent, lower-class, Irish man who grows up near and in Dublin in the early twentieth century. Throughout much of the novel, Stephen struggles with his Irish Catholic faith, and at the end of the novel he decides to exile himself from Ireland. Though Miller and Stephen have some similarities, including their dissatisfaction with the world around them and their re-
spective decisions to leave their homes, Miller has not lived the plot of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. As they continue discussing the book, Miller notes, “Sitting at the edge of a continent with a cute boy reading me James Joyce was the height of sexiness to me” (106). The sexualization of intellectualism is a recurring theme in *Spilt Milk* and in several queer counter-publics. Perhaps this sexualization occurs because queer people have to think about themselves and their identity in a way that allows them to see a version of themselves reflected in intellectual literature that concerns itself with identity. Heterosexual people can of course still think about their identity in deep and intelligent ways. Because public circulating discourse reinforces that queer identities are not normative, people who identify as queer must consider how their sexuality is not like what they see represented.

Queer approaches to reading provide alternative methods for looking at texts that may be more interesting and useful to a queer reader than other methods of literary criticism. Michael states, regarding *Portrait*, “As a gay man, I’m not sure I can relate to it that much. Everyone’s so hetero in the book” (106). Miller responds, “I’m gay too, but I feel what Stephen Dedalus goes through really speaks to me. The last lines are the most beautiful words ever written about individuality and setting yourself free from your family” (106). Miller is arguably correct; the last lines of Joyce’s novel read:

> APRIL 26. Mother is putting my new secondhand clothes in order. She prays now, she says, that I may learn in my own life and away from home and friends what the heart is and what it feels. Amen. So be it. Welcome, O life, I go to en-

---

22 The sexualization of intellectualism occurs in publics that are not specifically queer as well.
23 I almost hesitate to say that sexualization is a process that happens to intellectualism; intellectualism seems so inherently sexual. However, I realize my own bias as a member of a queer counterpublic in which intellectualism is very much considered sexual and as an individual who also considers intellectualism the height of sexiness.
counter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.

APRIL 27. Old father, old artificer, stand me now and ever in good stead.

Queer people must struggle with discovering their identity and whom and what they love, and unfortunately they may lose the support of their family at the moment they reveal the queer portion of their identity. Much like Stephen Dedalus, Miller is trying to create his own life away from the home in which he grew up.

The character Stephen Dedalus’s entry into the world reflects the queer coming out process. He leaves his family and enters a new, unfamiliar world. For a queer person, this can mean entering queer space. Miller and Michael notably came out to one another in the preceding conversation—Michael says he is gay and Miller offers the appropriate response: that he is gay too. Miller even states, “I replied, knowing full well I had to complete the coming-out call-and-response, as precise as any liturgy” (106). Miller and Michael are both already “out,” but one of the strange things about the coming out process is how constant that process is. The coming out process, a “call-and-response,” begins after Miller has expressed his attraction to Michael and the two have flirted with one another a little bit. Miller describes, “‘Wow!’ Michael nodded, impressed, then decided to fish for some information. ‘As a gay man, I’m not sure I can relate to it that much.’” Indeed, both Miller and Michael seem to know that the other is going to come out even before he does.

---

24 Miller does not seem to use the term “call-and-response” to evoke the ways in which this term has particular meaning in many African-American churches. His use of this term perhaps highlights his whiteness. Because the word has been appropriated into white culture, he has the privilege to say “call-and-response” without thinking of the culture from which it originated.
As gay men, Michael and Miller have to come out to one another and indeed, to most new people they meet. Part of queer experience is the constant reaffirmation of one’s identity, both to the self and to others. This process naturally has the status of liturgy in the queer community because it is so important. The liturgy allows queer people to find one another and be certain they have found someone safe. It is of course ironic that Miller compares the coming out process to an often-Christian ritual since certain Christian groups so actively suppress representations of queerness in discourse.

Although Michael and Miller have “come out” before and are presumably both public with their sexualities, they still have to name their homosexuality for one another. The closet is a peculiar facet of queer existence. Because heterosexual people tend to assume heterosexuality in others, they create the need for queer people to come out of the closet; if we did not make assumptions about people’s sexuality, it would at least be true that both heterosexuals and queer people have to identify their sexualities. In her famous analysis of the gay closet, The Epistemology of the Closet, Eve Kosofsky Sedgewick describes the prevalence of the closet in the lives of many gay people:

For many gay people [the closet] is still the fundamental feature of social life; and there can be few gay people, however courageous and forthright by habit, however fortunate in the support of their immediate communities, in whose lives the closet is not still a shaping presence (68).

Again, assuming that everyone is heterosexual creates the closet. That Michael and Miller have to come out to one another and complete this piece of the “liturgy” demonstrates just how powerful the assumptions hegemonic mass culture makes are to gay people.

25 Although they of course might already have their suspicions.
Not only does Miller find in Michael a gay man, he finds a member of a gay male counterpublic. Perhaps Michael will finally be what Miller was looking for in San Francisco. Michael and Miller continue talking to one another. Michael is a political radical—exactly the type of person Miller was looking for when he came to San Francisco in the first place. Miller wants to be a political radical himself. When thinking about Michael, Miller states:

*Naturally, I immediately proceeded to fall in love. Michael’s political commitment and post-hippie communal living was in stark contrast to David’s [Miller’s ex-boyfriend] lifestyle. Talking with Michael, I didn’t feel like I was saying something wrong, like I was being judged, as I often experienced when I talked with David (107-8).*

Miller does not want to be judged; some queer people may not want to be marked, or they at least may desire to be able to enter a space in which they are no longer marked. He wants to be able to say and do what he wants in the manner he wants. He does not want to feel like he is wrong. Miller searches for these qualities in a partner the same way queer people search for them in the world. Queer people create spaces and counterpublics to not feel judged.²⁶ Miller wants to not feel judged for his political aspirations and way of being in the world. He wants, and this want may ring true for many heterosexual readers as well, a partner who does not judge him for who he is. Michael, because he is a student and has various political commitments, will even challenge Miller to be better. The presence of someone like Michael is a feature of the queer space Miller has been seeking throughout the piece.

In a fantasy that Miller describes during the performance, Miller tells the audience about his ideal gay male counterpublic. He imagines an idealistic situation during his dinner with Mi-

²⁶ Queer people create these spaces to not be judged for their sexual identity. To say that queer spaces are entirely free from judgment is too optimistic.
We can forgive Miller’s idealism, as he is nineteen years old. Thinking over the dinner, he conceives:

There will be a brood of dynamic leftist gay men in attendance. We will eat a delicious ovovegetarian meal that Michael and I will prepare. I’ll commit to going to Cuba with them. ‘Venceremos!’\textsuperscript{27} We shall be victorious!’ we will all shout. At the right moment Michael will invite me into his bedroom to listen to his album of whale songs. Michael will kiss me all over and then fuck me gently underneath the poster of Che with the slogan HASTA LA VICTORIA SIEMPRE!\textsuperscript{28} (108)

Miller’s idealistic situation takes place in queer space, specifically gay male space. He needs to be around other lefty gay men. Indeed, everything about the situation—an ovovegetarian meal, the notion of going to Cuba, a poster of Che—would be perceived by most as lefty. The other gay men in the situation are aware Michael takes Miller into his bedroom; their sex is public or at least publicly-known. Michael will fuck Miller. Miller is receptive to Michael’s ideas and Michael’s dick. Miller is also not ashamed to admit he is bottoming, which in some queer circles is a cause for shame.\textsuperscript{29} Although Miller never let his ex-boyfriend have sex with him, Michael’s ideas and radicalism are enough for Miller to receive Michael’s sexual organ. Because Michael is in what Miller envisions as such an interesting gay male counterpublic, Miller wants to engage him sexually.

Gay male counterpublics do not really look like what Miller imagined them as, or they at least did not in the 1970s. Miller’s expectations are unfortunately crushed. His reality of course does not meet his idealistic expectations. He describes, “It turned out that Michael was more in-

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{27} We overcome.
  \item \textsuperscript{28} This entire passage is italicized in Miller’s original.
  \item \textsuperscript{29} To bottom is to take the receptive position during anal sex.
\end{itemize}
terested in world socialism than my dick. His boyfriend, Luis, was the leader of the brigade and made it clear that Michael was off-limits. I was shown the door with all the other comrades at the end of the evening” (109). Miller got the queer space and counterpublic for which he was looking, but he missed the sex, which this passage makes clear was always the most important part. Why shouldn’t it be? Miller is unable to pick up the attractive gay man with whom he was attempting to have sex. Michael and Miller’s earlier interaction would seem to indicate that they were moving towards sex with one another. Miller may have misread the situation and, because we are privy to his thoughts, he shows us how he construed the situation to make it seem like a flirtation. The situation that actually happened may look nothing like how Miller describes it. Since flirtation and a cute man are involved, Miller’s mind understandably misconstrues dialogue at this moment. As an adult looking back on his fantasy, Miller finds humor in his idealistic imagination.

In Spilt Milk, Miller has a revolutionary desire for making a queer-positive world. Perhaps due to his youth at the time the piece takes place, Miller describes conflicts between queer people and heterosexual people both actively and violently. He states near the beginning of the piece, “It felt like we were at war. I wanted to go help Harvey Milk fight these slime. It was a revolution, a better world trying to be born” (89). Miller announces these goals before he arrives in San Francisco. Making a better world is something he feels he needs to do even before he encounters the Moonies and sees the happy gay men on the street. But he is right; there were in the 1970s and continue to be today important fights that the queer community needs to have because heteronormative hegemonic culture continually insists, at best, that we are unnecessary and, at worst, that we are evil. Some public discourse makes it seem like queer people want the destruc-
tion of hegemonic culture just because we derive pleasure from ripping apart their foundational institutions.30

Miller’s comments about war are a specific response to Anita Bryant’s crusade to remove anti-discrimination laws that protect gay people.31 Bryant had just unsuccessfully tried to pass a law in California that would have prevented gay people from being teachers. In Bryant’s mind, stopping queer people from being teachers was important because it could help prevent them from interacting with children altogether. We need a war not only because heteronormativity in culture either asks us to take part in events with which we are not comfortable. More typically, heteronormative culture does not allow us to participate in events that publicly-circulating discourse represents as necessary. Laws that claim protections for queer people always have the perhaps intentional effect of requiring queer people to identify themselves in order to receive the protections of the law. Cindy Patton explicates the point:

Homosexuals’ attempts to gain protection to practice sex as private has produced a legal paradox: to insert privacy into the already accepted package of civil rights (to political participation, equal access, protection from discrimination) requires establishing lesbians and gay men as a publicly inscribed class. In the most immediate sense, a gay person must ‘come out’ in order to get the right to privacy. (170)

---

30 Even if queer people do derive pleasure from destroying these institutions—they are awfully oppressive—Miller’s desire to end them stems from his desire to create a queer-positive world. There are, of course, very radical queer people who want to rip apart any aspect of heteronormative culture just because. I am sympathetic to their worldview. I, however, find that trying to remake these institutions so that they are most useful to everyone is a more useful and realistic method of queer world-making. At the very least these institutions should not be a staple of contemporary society in which everyone is expected to take part.

31 Anita Bryant was an active spokesperson against gay rights in the 1970s. One belief she proclaimed quite vocally was that if gay people were allowed to interact with children, for example, as a teacher, gay people would turn children gay.
The need to be public about their sexuality to receive the protections of the law is relatively insignificant for activists and other individuals who have made homosexuality part of their public image. For the very people who need the protection of these laws, queer people in situations in which being publicly open about their status as queer is complicated, this publicness is cause for terror. Activists such as Miller fight for the rights of both themselves and for queer people who are at moments in their lives in which fighting themselves is difficult if not impossible.

Miller wants to fight this fight because he experiences situations in which it is clear that queer people must fight for their place in the world. At the end of his piece, Miller overhears that Harvey Milk and George Moscone have been assassinated. He describes, “‘Hey, ‘dya hear the news?’ this obvious jerk in the truck slurred through his open door. ‘They got those two guys up in Frisco. Yeah, some ex-cop killed that queer Milk and that Dago mayor of theirs, whashizname, Macaroni?’” Harvey Milk overstayed his welcome as a useful queer icon. Or perhaps that was the problem: that he was, in fact, too useful for furthering the queer movement.

When Milk was elected, Democrats could feel good about themselves because they elected a gay (white) man to public office for the first time. In his short eleventh-month tenure before his assassination, Milk was an asset for furthering queer objectives in San Francisco. Based on his significant contributions to San Francisco politics, Milk became more than just a signifier for a “job well done” by the Democratic Party.

---

32 Perhaps they are justifiably afraid of physical or mental violence.
33 Besides sponsoring a bill that helped prevent discrimination against lesbians and gay men, Milk spoke very openly about the importance of equality for lesbians and gay men. Milk’s interests spanned more than the issues affecting lesbians and gay men, and he became an important agent of social change in San Francisco. His “Biography” on the Milk Foundation website provides additional information.
In the minds of discourse creators in the public, Milk’s ideal function would have been to remain an iconic minority subject. Lauren Berlant describes moments in which a minority subject becomes a way of representing that subject in public discourse; she states:

In moments of intensified racism, homophobia, misogyny, and phobias about poverty, these ‘positive’ images of national minority represent both the minimum and the maximum of what the dominating cultures will sanction for circulation, exchange, and consumption. As iconic minority subjects, these luminaries allow the hegemonic consuming public to feel that it has already achieved intimacy and equality with the marginal mass populations; as minority exceptions, they represent heroic autonomy from their very ‘people’; as ‘impersonations’ of minority identity, they embody the very ordinary conditions of subjective distortion that characterize stereotypic marginality. (104)

This type of minority subject can exist as a public figure. However, when minority subjects attempt to point out that discourse for the public can exclude marginalized people, they are typically silenced and asked not to do so. Harvey Milk was not content with the situation of queer people, and he attempted to create real social change. Berlant’s description of the iconic minority subject is simply not who Harvey Milk was. He has to die at the end of Miller’s piece—the title Spilt Milk itself indicates that Milk’s death is a significant part of the play—because Miller needs to see that at that moment, California is not yet a place where gay men can successfully contribute to their own political scene, or at least not in the form or to the extent Miller would like. Miller is not an iconic minority subject, either. He is not at the whim of heteronormative culture, nor does he perform his queerness in a way that heteronormative culture is always comfortable with. His deeply political work that often critiques censorship is at various instances uninteresting or
deeply offensive to this, in terms of sex, often too easily offended culture. Still, his process of queer world-making is, at worst, merely not useful to heteronormative hegemonic culture. He does not call for heteronormative hegemonic culture’s destruction; he wishes that members of this culture would realize they have assigned only one particular way of living value, but that there are many equally valid ways of existing in the world.

**Finding a Counterpublic at the Theater**

Miller’s performances are beautiful for their honesty. He does not attempt to pretend that the situation for queer people in America is particularly great at the moment, specifically in terms of HIV in the gay male community. He does not shy away from descriptions of heterosexism. He has no concerns regarding speaking about sex; discussions of sex form the heart of many of his performances. Miller never tries to pretend that any of these things are not, at times, ugly or unfortunate, but he finds meaning in sex, in the human body, and even in HIV-positive diagnoses in his colleagues and lovers. Miller’s ability to make meaning out of these events, which constitute defining features of gay male life, are a reason his works remain popular in the gay male counterpublic. However, his lack of shame for these things—sex, HIV, the human body—are a large part of the reason heteronormative hegemonic culture constantly attempts to censor Miller. How dare he not feel shame about the very things heteronormative culture is built upon shaming? And worst of all, what if children saw representations of queer sex?

Miller wants to create a world in which he and other queer people can represent themselves without pushback. Public discourse constantly asserts that a child seeing representations of queer sex would be the worst thing for that child. Public discourse is always seeking its own future; it attempts to protect a child who does not exist and who will never grow up. The position

---

34 I again think of the moment in *My Queer Body* in which Miller sits on an audience member’s lap. In another performance, *Naked Breath*, Miller asks an audience member to draw on him with a marker.
of homosexuals in contemporary society allows them to subvert this constant desire for the future. Miller’s performance is a reflection of this ability. One of his concerns is with queer people’s ability to be effective political agents right now and our need as queer people to create a world in which publicly-circulating discourse is interesting and useful to us. Edelman argues that the creation of this world upsets the desire for futurity in heteronormative hegemonic society, stating, “Are we willing… to accept that the figural burden of queerness, the burden that queerness is phonically produced precisely to represent, is that of the force that shatters the fantasy of Imaginary unity” (22). Queer performances, such as Miller’s, attempt to remind members of the public that we never will be able to achieve a perfect future. The infantile citizen who remains a child always theoretically could be the achievement of this ideal, but she definitely cannot be its achievement if she grows up and learns about sex. Miller fulfills what Edelman proposes as the function of homosexuals in contemporary society or at least attempts to.

Edelman notes an important function that homosexuals can have within the public imagination; Miller does fulfill this function, but he does so as an effect of his desire to create a world which supports and has cultural artifacts for use by gay men. Part of Edelman’s claim is that homosexuals enact the destruction of the fantasy that we can create a perfectible society just by being in a world that does not want us to be. Miller’s performance does not explicitly seek to destroy heteronormative notions of reproductive futurism, but it does so implicitly by championing the interests of gay men at the present moment. Miller’s ethos, and the ethos of queer studies more broadly, supports the ability of individuals to live how they want to right now, instead of focusing on the potential for people to live better in the future.

35 This child cannot learn about sex at all—even reproductive sex.
Though Miller never finds the counterpublic he searches for within the narrative of his piece, he creates this counterpublic in his audience. By providing examples of experiences queer people identify with and find useful, Miller connects the queer people in his audience to one another. In her book *Utopia in Performance*, theatre and sexuality theorist Jill Dolan describes how these moments in theatre, which she calls “utopian performatives,” occur. She writes:

> Utopian performatives describe small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what they world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense (5).

Miller’s utopian performatives occur in *Spilt Milk* because of his humor. If the audience can laugh at Miller’s naiveté, and at the same time desire a positive world for gay people like Miller does, Miller successfully makes his audience into queer space. The brilliance of *Spilt Milk* is that while the audience is invited to laugh with the performer at his youthful view of the world, he also makes them consider how such a world like what he desired as a nineteen year old would be useful and beautiful to them. Wouldn’t it be great if everyone were actively fighting for political change and having sex all the time? Though such a world is obviously a fantasy, its status as a fantasy does not make this world any less enjoyable.

Though *Spilt Milk* charts Miller’s youthful experiences with disappointment, it does not encourage the audience to feel similarly disappointed. It charts one young, white, middle-class, gay man’s experience with being alone in the world and searching for a counterpublic and usable

---

36 I do not wish to imply that Miller’s performances are not useful or interesting for someone who is not queer. However, I here specifically concern myself specifically with how other queer people create queer space for themselves during Miller’s performance.
gay male space for the first time. Finding an appropriate counterpublic is a difficult task, and it is something with which many people, not just queer people, struggle. *Spilt Milk* shows an important moment in Miller’s life and one of the first in which he really feels like an adult. As a nineteen year old, the Miller of the piece does not have much agency to create discourse or to establish his own counterpublic. By performing *Spilt Milk*, however, an older Miller creates discourse for his own queer counterpublic. Because he creates the space he desires himself, this counterpublic is what Miller was looking for. Even if this space is not the world for queer people Miller conceived when he was nineteen, the counterpublic he creates is the closest our contemporary world can enact his youthful fantasy. Though he never finds the queer space he needs in California, Miller manages to create it in whatever space he performs *Spilt Milk*. 
Selected Bibliography


