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Duty and pleasure in Brouwer's HIV rhetoric

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ABSTRACT

In this short essay, we read Dan Brouwer's scholarship on HIV rhetoric through the philosophical lens of hedonics, a branch of ethics that preoccupies itself with the relationship between duty and pleasure. In doing so, we draw attention to the corporeal, affective, and symbolic dimensions of pleasure inherent in his writings. We gesture toward three ethics cultivated from Brouwer's work: an ethics of legibility, of multiplicity, and of care.

KEYWORDS

Brouwer; HIV rhetoric;
community engagement;
memory

Dan Brouwer's work on community engagement and advocacy was due, in no small part, to his own investment in making the world a more livable place for those living with HIV. Dan was active with organizations in both Chicago and Phoenix, the two places he called home for almost thirty years, and his research and pedagogy are a reflection and continuation of those efforts. As a scholar enamored with the dynamics of counter-publicity, it is not surprising that Dan's academic endeavors blurred the distinction between notions of the public and renderings of the private. Dan's expertise was animated by the thrill of political resistance and the gratification that stemmed from especially visionary interventions. Even more important for our purposes, Dan's body of work summoned a number of ethical questions that demand our attention: What are the responsibilities of the reader when consuming texts produced by marginalized groups? How should critics discern and assess the infrapolitics of movement participants? How does one appraise the constraints of a particularly daunting situation and creatively initiate change?

In this short essay, we read Dan's work through the philosophical lens of hedonics, a branch of ethics that preoccupies itself with the balance between duty and pleasure. Dan's scholarship moved fluidly among this conceptual duality and offered a model for scrutinizing the shortcomings of political life while exhibiting a delight in the process of invention. His research focusing on the ways people with HIV navigated discriminatory public spheres by tactically infiltrating them on their own terms, for example, illustrates the weight of obligation that underscored his approach. At the same time, Dan's work was remarkably engrossing and his selection of case studies especially captivating: HIV tattoos, queer-produced zines, eccentric movement actors, and community-inspired memory projects are among the many absorbing artifacts that Dan gave presence to in his writings. As people who knew and loved Dan, we can't help but see this relationship between duty and pleasure echoed in his spirited persona. Those with even a passing familiarity of Dan will no doubt have memories of his gracious and sincere demeanor. At the same time, how can anyone forget the sly grin that would materialize on his face when the

most subtly salacious remark was made? It is hard not to think of Dan without imagining both the serious engagement and deep attention he expressed during the most routine of conversations but also the playful interjection he brought to any discussion.

When we posit that Dan's scholarship on HIV/AIDS is best exemplified by the ethical impulses of hedonics, we mean to draw attention to the corporeal, affective, and symbolic dimensions of pleasure inherent in his writings. Scholars such as James Chesebro contend that hedonics is a "sociocultural system" reflected in much of queer life and became especially prominent with the realities of a political system that disregarded the wellbeing of people living with HIV.¹ The inventive necessities that accompanied activist interventions to educate publics about HIV, for example, were concurrently relational, communal, and political, and were undergirded by a moral purpose in their worldmaking ventures. Dan's work gives deep focus to the collective delight and community identification that can be cultivated from everyday meaning-making practices, which, as his writings show, sometimes materialize in unexpected places. His critical eye for both the obligations of movement activism and the enjoyment that stems from such advocacy captures the entwined sensibilities of hedonic reasoning. In what follows, we gesture toward three ethics cultivated from Dan's writings as they pertain to the balance between duty and pleasure: an ethics of legibility, of multiplicity, and of care.

The notion of legibility is integral to Dan's work on the rhetoric of HIV. The many ways an artifact or event is read – who does the analysis and how – can have material impact in the lives of people living with HIV and others implicated in the HIV community (caregivers, family members, advocates, LGBTQ persons, people of color, people who are poor, immigrants, people who use drugs, sex workers). Dan is conscientious about the goal to "extend our imagination beyond the physicality of artifacts and storage bins toward the symbolic, the immateriality of imagining, the forces of affect, and more" and also "to caution against overcorrection in favor of the imaginary."² Legibility has multiple edges for Dan: recognition, finding others like oneself, being criticized, having that image being read incorrectly or deployed in unforeseen ways. How one is read has to do with time, place, culture, politics – of all the audiences, even the unintended ones. This ethic is demonstrated in Dan's careful use of community definitions, social contexts, and discursive arguments in the cases of tattoos, zines, memorials, and cemeteries.

The HIV zines, *Diseased Pariah News* and *Infected Faggot Perspectives*, were produced by groups of gay men living with HIV in the US from 1990 to 1999 to a limited distribution. These pre-social media artifacts were full of outrageous humor, scathing political critique, and erotica. Brouwer situates the humor – including top 10 lists for "People We Would Like to Infect" and images of notorious conservative Senator Jesse Helms naked in a simulacrum of noted gay photographer Robert Mapplethorpe's *Self-Portrait* – in its political contexts. "No culturally competent reader of these zines would have presumed the earnestness of intentional infection," Brouwer notes as he brings in the politics of camp and the role of humor in critique.³ Helms was a vicious opponent to HIV prevention initiatives and pushed for abstinence-only messaging in US public health: Helms was virulently homophobic and consistently insisted that homosexuality was obscene and should not be "promoted" through health education (such as safer sex messaging). By situating Helms as a gay icon, the zines undermine Helms's heteronormative and

homophobic positions. Zines were a low-cost practice for communities to distribute news, conversations and ideas: they were not meant for permanence. It would be easy today to read the humor and threats as serious, as the result of viciousness, as lighthearted and perhaps shallow: not as the social commentary they are. As these zines emerged, effective HIV treatment was non-existent or new; everyone diagnosed with HIV fully expected to die soon. Brouwer's work preserves them, and points to their potential political importance.

Dan's work on HIV counter-publics also exhibited a commitment to the idea that cultural change is a multidimensional endeavor. Surveying Dan's scholarship, we were struck by the vast conceptual chest that he employed to advance his research on community engagement. He took up ideas such as direct action, camp, memory, embodiment, tactility, mobility, the grotesque, and the erotic, among so many others. Dan's research is as fixated on the actions of vernacular communities as it is on the forces that exhaustively weighed on these groups. Throughout, he resisted an oversimplification of the ways people might disrupt and redirect the flows of everyday life in order to foment social change. In his writings about the aforementioned zines, for instance, Dan contemplated how these outlets were "conducive to the constitution of counterpublics" by looking to the multifarious ways identity and relationality were conceived. He notes that the publications sought to intervene in the ways people living with HIV made themselves public but did so through noticeably divergent political approaches. These zines exhibited contrasting commitments to "gay liberation politics" and "radical queer politics" but both served a function in catalyzing change.⁴ And while both of these were decidedly serious in their aim to produce a better world for people living with HIV, there was an unmistakable pleasurable in these texts that captured Dan's attention. As he observes, the editors of these zines published "nude or nearly nude photographs of themselves, friends, and readers" in order to "counter mainstream representations of gay men with HIV/AIDS as either desexualized ... or sexually lethal."⁵ Dan's resistance to reductive readings of community engagement shines through as he outlined the playfulness found in these periodicals, including fictive revenge fantasies and the irony of naming unforeseen health conditions in a manner that evoked drag queens. But even as he seemed to revel in this playfulness he was also quick to scrutinize the ubiquity of whiteness found in the pages of these zines.

To be sure, this spirit of multiplicity is highlighted in the rhetorical artifacts that Dan both crafted and immersed himself. His research suggested that social change is a messy, if fascinating, enterprise that requires critics to survey a broad spectrum of human practices in order to understand the complexity of life. In his essay about HIV tattoos, for example, Dan gave voice to the embodied contradistinctions of explicitly making disease intelligible on the skin. These markings, which generally borrowed their representation from the biohazardous waste symbol, acted as both defiant gestures of visibility politics but also potential modes of discipline and surveillance. They blurred the line between public and private and also defied the shame that is sometimes foisted on people living with HIV, even as these men relied on normative expectations about the appearance of so-called healthy bodies.⁶ Likewise, in his moving assessment of the legacy of the AIDS Memorial Quilt, Dan points to the ways variable understandings of "mobility" affect how we read this iconic installation. Political stances about the Quilt's place in queer life – as either an itinerant public memorial that should continue

to circulate or a piece of AIDS history that should be preserved in a museum – is informed by perceptions of mobility as a symbolic resource and a material reality.⁷ There are no easy answers offered in these articles, but there is a consistently noticeable desire to engage change in both serious and playful ways.

Care is another ethic found in Dan's work on HIV. One concern was how people living with HIV die and the ways that they are treated. The first two decades of the epidemic are filled with stories about discrimination and mistreatment: from employers, families, medical providers, community members, former lovers, and even funeral homes. HIV-related stigma carried forward even unto death. Funerals and memorials loom in the HIV epidemic, particularly in the years before effective treatment was available. Activists asked for political funerals; the AIDS quilt would grow to be the largest folk art exhibition in the world. Dan wrote about these interventions, and also talked about those who would go unnamed. He pointed to cisgender and white narratives that permeated the rhetoric around early HIV – “within AIDS public memory, queers, intravenous drug users, sex workers, and others were long exiled from the realm of the epidemic's grievable in favor of ‘innocent victims’ from the ‘general population.’”⁸

Hart Island lies just off the Bronx's shores and holds the unclaimed dead from the sprawling metropolis. Dan and his longtime interlocuter Charles Morris examine the people living with HIV who were interred there throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Through four narrative interventions – one documentary video, a webseries, an online museum, and one fictional television series – they engage with the politics of identification, as well as those of erasure. Race is one critical way that the bodies are sorted: both those buried and those who are caretakers. The various texts all feature primarily queer people of color in their remembrances of the dead. The caretakers are also primarily people of color – specifically Black and Latinx men who were serving time in prison. This analysis calls into question race-neutral views of the epidemic, as this constitutes whiteness at its center and leads to “the long mnemonic of poverty, racism, homophobia, and AIDS phobia. Raising these dead is an extraordinary summoning.”⁹ Understanding that race provides a lens for understanding texts, including history, this reading of Hart Island begins with centering Indigenous, Black and Latinx approaches to rhetorical criticism. Processes of identification and naming – of claiming the dead and their complicated contexts – are ways of practicing care, a way of moving forward in solidarity with the spirits and their struggles.

This forum is a demonstration of this ethic: we care for Dan and believe it imperative to continue the hard work of community engagement and scholarly intervention that he so passionately embodied. People living with HIV continue to confront political, medical, and cultural obstacles that demand our attention and our commitment to change. Dan's eloquent and expressive approach offers one map for deliberating these many challenges. Just as he took it as his duty to intercede in these essential conversations, we take it as our responsibility to carry on these vital endeavors. And like Dan, we do so with pleasure.

Notes

1. James Chesebro, “Ethical Communication and Sexual Orientation,” in *Communication Ethics in an Age of Diversity*, ed. Josina M. Makau and Ronald C. Arnette (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 139.

2. Daniel C. Brouwer, "From Vernacular to Official – and the Spaces in Between," *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 1, no. 2 (2014): 183, <https://doi.org/10.14321/qed.1.2.0181>.
3. Daniel C. Brouwer, "Counterpublicity and Corporeality in HIV/AIDS Zines," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 22, no. 5 (2005): 361, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07393180500342860>.
4. Brouwer, "Counterpublicity and Corporeality in HIV/AIDS Zines," 357.
5. Brouwer, "Counterpublicity and Corporeality in HIV/AIDS Zines," 356–59.
6. Daniel C. Brouwer, "The Precarious Visibility Politics of Self-Stigmatization: The Case of HIV/AIDS Tattoos," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1998): 115, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10462939809366216>.
7. Daniel C. Brouwer, "From San Francisco to Atlanta and Back Again: Ideologies of Mobility in the AIDS Quilt's Search for a Homeland," in *Remembering the AIDS Quilt*, ed. Charles E. Morris III (Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011), 161–86.
8. Daniel C. Brouwer and Charles E. Morris III, "Decentering Whiteness in AIDS Memory: Indigent Rhetorical Criticism and the Dead of Hart Island," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 107, no. 2 (2021): 168, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2021.1905868>.
9. Brouwer and Morris, "Decentering Whiteness in AIDS Memory," 176.

Disclosure statement

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