

Chalk talk & campus walks:

Queer disruption and erasure on private, elite university campuses in the 80s and 90s

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## Abstracts

**Chapter One** of this thesis considers university belonging as it is formed, negotiated, and articulated around queer activism in three private, elite universities. It does so through building on Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner's (1998) classic polemic, "Sex in Public," and using a conceptual framework I call *pure citizenship* to explore the conditions of sanitization, erasure, and tenuous incorporation that often characterized universities' relationship to queer activism at the time. Specifically, I discuss four incidents in the late 1980s and early 1990s at Tufts University, Yale University, and Smith College when queer activist groups chalked "obscene" messages on the ground or posterred "obscene" posters on walls, and the institutional and community response was to have them removed and erased. Using *pure citizenship* as a conceptual guide, this paper traces the complex institutional maneuvers through which the chalk and posters are removed—justifying the sanitization of "obscene" queer activism and incorporating more tenable forms of queerness within the fold of the university.

**Chapter Two** is a methodological piece that introduces a way to examine archival photographs called *foregrounding the background*. *Foregrounding the background* is developed through critical pedagogical approaches to knowledge production. Specifically, *foregrounding the background* presents an optic switch, whereby the background of an archival photograph becomes the focal point of rigorous visual, analytical, and historical study. *Foregrounding the background* asks what an exploration of the background as critical subject might do to formulate a disruptive understanding of the photographed space and the actual, lived space. This paper explains this methodological approach using a 1981 photograph in the Tufts University yearbook.

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## Introduction

As a kid, I never kept a journal. I'm not sure why. And it wasn't for lack of trying: I would always start one, writing in it vigorously for many nights in a row, and then I would lose my fervor and give it up. It was a habit that wouldn't stick. I still have a few of those attempted journals—pages marked with some of my undeveloped thoughts, and doodles, some tattoo ideas (from when I was twelve!), and some movie quotes I liked (from *Scary Movie 4*). But none of those journals are really filled; none of them document my subjective adolescent experience to any deep or exhaustive degree. I didn't really grasp the importance, I guess, of archives.

It could be said, then, that my experience in the Educational Studies program was about making up for lost time. Through my contact with people and scholars in the Ed Studies program, through my work at the LGBT Center and Women's Center, I was introduced to the world of archives, and the importance of archival work to a queer and feminist politic, which I found myself slowly developing and articulating throughout this program. A mentor of mine, Nino Testa, instilled in me the importance of archives—of knowing and grasping, firmly, to a history (or histories, plural) as a sense of community. A colleague of mine, Kailah Carden, wrote her own Educational Studies thesis and a brilliant co-authored piece with Sabina Vaught (see Carden & Vaught, 2016) that articulates, critically and poignantly, how queer knowledge communities might be formed around archives.

These run-ins with the world of archives and archival knowledge production got me going. At first, my interest in archives developed as somewhat of a joke: "I love the archives," I would say, vaguely, to anyone bored enough to listen. "The archives" stood in for anything and everything, from my Instagram feed to the cluttered mess of clothes on my bedroom floor (which, I still contend, is an archive). Then, one day in the Educational Studies workroom in

Paige Hall, I was sitting, browsing books that lined the shelves, waiting for a meeting. It was April, then, and I was just beginning to develop ideas for my Master's thesis, although I was still unsure of what I wanted to write about. A book, sitting on a cluttered pile in a cramped bookshelf, found its way into my line of vision. The book was *The Archival Turn in Feminism: Outrage in Order* by Kate Eichhorn (2013).

I was interested enough in the title and book cover alone. I removed it from its pile, and read it while I was riding the bus home. Almost immediately, it opened me up to a new world of scholarship. It helped me articulate what it was that I liked so much about the *idea* of archives. Eichhorn (2013) writes:

If we have become more interested in the archive both as a subject of inquiry and creative locus for activism and art during the past two decades, then such interest in owing in part to the archive's ability to restore to us what is routinely taken away under neoliberalism—not history itself but rather the ability to understand the conditions of our everyday lives longitudinally... (p.6)

This quote reached out to me, like a call to action. If my time in Educational Studies helped me think more about the importance of building critical knowledge communities (which it did), this book felt like it located a place, or concept, around which that community felt more possible. It articulated the importance of developing a community in a time when everything felt markedly individual, isolated. It helped me think about my own growth as a person and scholar, but even more so it helped me locate my growth within a community. *Outrage in Order* introduced me to the world of university archives, which became the location of an entire year of study for me, and it did so with a political intent: *Looking back is important, and here's why.*



Following Eichhorn's quote, this thesis began with a simple, yet vast, question: How can we use archives and archival research to understand the conditions of the now? This thesis is the product of my exploration of this question, and I hope the pages contained within resemble an engaged, if not always explicit, exploration of it.

But, how and why approach archives in a field called Educational Studies? For me, archives present a location to study what I have come to understand as two main features of Educational Studies: the critical scholarly study of education (and educational contexts), and the study of knowledge production and exchange. If this is so, then this thesis presents two chapters, each of which attends to one of these charges, using archives as the source.

The first chapter is a conceptual, data-driven piece, formed out of my work at the institutional archives at three universities: Tufts University, Yale University, and Smith College. This chapter developed from an interest to better understand queer university activism within the politically turbulent era of the late 80s and early 90s, and was partially inspired by the queer students I was lucky enough to work with during my graduate program—and all the activist work, in various capacities, I saw them doing. In it, I discuss four incidents, from 1989 to 1994, in which queer activist groups chalked or posterized on university grounds, the response to which was to have those “obscene” materials decisively removed. That piece is about the push-and-pull between queer activist groups and larger university administrators and community members during this time; it considers complex institutional negotiations at a time when queer activism was just on the horizon of articulating itself more forcefully in the mainstream. That piece ends with a discussion of why looking back to those stories might matter now.

The second chapter is a methodological piece, second authored by Deirdre I. Judge. This piece started with, and continued from, an argument—or, what critical pedagogues like to call: a

“dialogue.” The dialogue was about one photo in the 1981 Tufts University yearbook, an image that had made the institutional rounds, so to speak (it was also featured in a Queer History Project completed by a student in 2006, and as part of a public installation on Tufts’ campus in 2015). The yearbook photograph is of the Tufts Gay Community, all with paper bags over their heads, sitting on a large campus walkway (doubling as a war memorial) called the Memorial Steps. In that paper, we discuss how our dialogue led us to considering the space *behind* that queer group: the Memorial Steps—what they were, and what they did to a reading of the photograph. From that dialogue, we developed a methodology called *foregrounding the background*, which uses critical pedagogical approaches to evolve and articulate an approach to reading archival photographs. That paper outlines the beginning of what we hope to be a capacious methodology that others might take up in their educational work.

## Chapter One

### Chalk talk:

Private elite universities & “obscene” queer activism in the 80s and 90s

Nicholas J. Whitney

#### **An obscene introduction, 1989**

In October 1989, the Lesbian and Gay Studies Center at Yale (LGSCY) hosted a conference called *Outside/Inside*.<sup>1</sup> The conference convened a number of well-known queer scholars and activists. Controversy began on Friday night of the conference when a Yale professor caught Bill Dobbs, a White queer activist and conference attendee, hanging up posters designed by the San Francisco-based art collective, Boys with Arms Akimbo. The posters, stapled in Yale academic buildings and featuring the slogan “Sex is... Just Sex,” displayed various images on them, including a cartoon drawing of a fully nude, cartoonishly muscular man, an up-close photograph of vaginal masturbation, and a “candid” shot of two people necking behind a nun, who is leering at the camera. Collectively, these posters are a tongue-in-cheek criticism on heteronormative admonitions and regulations of queer sexual cultures, as well as they are reminiscent of, and indeed a part of, many AIDS activist guerilla art tactics of the time (Crimp, 2004; Meyer, 1995; Berlant & Freeman, 2002; Halberstam, 1993; Burk, 2015). *Sex is... just sex*, blazoned across these posters and strewn about Yale’s campus, was an urgent rallying cry, and a world-making tactic against the broader state privatization and discipline of counterpublic sexual cultures, like the ones queers cultivated despite and often in response to

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<sup>1</sup> “A thing of legend,” a mentor of mine told me. For more accounts of this conference and its aftermath, see Crimp (2004), chapter “The boys in my bedroom” (pp. 151-154) and Cvetkovich (2003).

governmental abuse and neglect in the 1980s and early 1990s (Berlant & Warner, 1998; Berlant & Freeman, 2002; Warner, 2002; Crimp, 2004).

Upon seeing these posters—and knowing they were associated with the Gay and Lesbian Conference that weekend—that outraged and scandalized Yale professor called the Yale Police. The transcript of the professor’s phone call is now available in the Yale archives:

Female voice: I was just calling ‘cause there’s a guy who just came down the hall.

Dispatcher: Uh huh.

Female voice: and he may be a member of the gay-lesbian, uh, nonsense—but he’s posting with a stapler really obscene, uh—

Dispatcher: Do you have a description of him?

Female voice: —posters.

And then a little later in the call:

Female voice: It’s probably just some gay-lesbian, uh—

Dispatcher: Well, I’ll send an officer —

Female voice: —crap.

Dispatcher: —over there to check it out anyway.<sup>2</sup>

The rest of the night—at least in my archival experience of it—unfolds like a quick, pulsing blur: The Yale police notifies the New Haven city police, who come to campus, storm the conference’s opening remarks, where they harass many and ultimately arrest nine gay men, including Bill Dobbs. The nine gay men are taken to the county jail in New Haven where they await hearing. The rest of the conference attendees, shocked and outraged, collect some of the

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<sup>2</sup> Larry Kramer Initiative for Lesbian and Gay Studies, Yale University, exhibit and research materials from *The Pink and The Blue, 1827-2004*, RU 963. The Dobbs Incident at the Gay and Lesbian Studies Conference, Box 2, Folders 47-48. Yale University Manuscripts and Archives. New Haven, CT.

“obscene” posters that Bill Dobbs had put up, and organize a loud, enraged, disruptive march down to the New Haven county jail. I saw much of the footage of this rally via a spliced-together VHS tape of various local news coverage that now sits in the Yale archives. The footage was stunning, disruptive, energetic: More than two hundred people participated in this demonstration, waving the posters and chanting, among other things, “*What’s the charge?*”

In this paper, I explore what accusations of obscenity (or general uncleanness) do, as in the police phone call above, to re-establish the (hetero)normative spatial and institutional conditions of normative citizenship at three private, elite universities in the late 80s and early 90s. Alongside the Dobbs Incident described above, I consider three other examples in the early 1990s when queer activist groups chalked on campus pavement or postered on building walls, the broader university response to which was to erase or remove those disruptions steadfastly, and incorporate modes of queerness that could be institutionalized as tenable forms of difference (Ferguson, 2012). This paper examines these erasures and selective incorporations by marking and describing what I see as two interrelated citizenship-projects specific to 1980s and early 90s national, political, economic, and cultural developments. The first is what many scholars describe as a shift to a mode of privatized citizenship in universities, in which citizenship came to be measured through its links to global consumerism and privatized market logics under neoliberalism (Mohanty, 2003; Giroux, 2002; Carey, 2016; Giroux, 2002; Ferguson, 2012). The second, explored more directly throughout this paper, is a heteronormative project of citizenship that forcefully refastened national and political membership to a conjugal, private, heterofamilial sphere, which had a host of corrosive implications for queer sexual cultures at the time (Berlant & Warner, 1998; Berlant, 1997). Ultimately, this paper seeks to explain how the conjunction of these two citizenship-projects (both of which gain force around privacy and privatization)

produce the particular institutional conditions for queer “obscurity” to be sanitized and purged, as in the Dobbs Incident—in favor of a more palatable, “cleaner” expressions of dissent and activism.

### **Universities, citizenship & ‘cleanliness’**

How are universities complexly situated in larger national citizenship projects? Why and how do universities “clean up” dissent, as they do so forcefully in the Dobbs Incident in 1989, while also remaining sites where critical knowledge production and political dissent appear to be crucial parts? I first situate these questions within what Kristi Carey (2016) has called the conditions of “cleanliness” at universities, whereby dissent is sanitized, managed, incorporated, (or otherwise rejected) from universities as a protection of structural forms of domination and the maintenance of university power. Carey (2016) locates “cleanliness” within a university context that has come to be increasingly governed by privatized, market logics, whereby students are positioned as private consumers, and citizenship within universities is no longer defined by a set of democratic values, but by those pertaining to the global, capitalist market (Mohanty, 2003; Giroux, 2002). While it is not within the purview of this paper to explain the complex and profound effects of these structural changes (often designated “neoliberalism”), some of their effects provide vital context for my thinking in this paper. Indeed, during the late twentieth and into the twenty-first century, universities shifted attention toward national and global entrepreneurial projects; forged more direct, often interdependent, relations with industry and the state; raised tuition rates and prices of attendance far outpacing inflation; shrunk the professoriate and humanities programs; and re-wrote curriculum and requirements to better articulate and produce a global, capitalist citizenry (Mohanty, 2003; Giroux, 2002; Carey, 2016; Ferguson, 2012; Newfield, 2008; Washburn, 2005; Harney & Moten, 2013).

I approach these shifts primarily through their direct effect on university activism, critical knowledge production, and political dissent within the academy (Mohanty, 2003; Ferguson, 2012; Giroux, 2002). As universities shift their attention to, and become imbricate in, national and transnational projects of citizenship-production in a global capitalist market, “minority difference” has become increasingly incorporated into (and contained within) universities as a way to productively manage dissent, becoming tenable primarily as pedagogical and administrative matters of “diversity and inclusion” (Ferguson, 2012; Ahmed, 2012; Carey, 2016; Mohanty, 2003). In this institutional schema, dissent that is *untenable* becomes increasingly subject to erasure or sanitization (Carey, 2016). Indeed, as Carey (2016) argues, “the ultimate goal [of the corporate, imperial university] is to create an environment where members of the campus community do not disrupt the daily functioning of the university,” which is accomplished in part through “cleaning up” dissident members and insurgent political demonstrations (p. 22). Carey (2016) discusses a sit-in against institutional racism at one private, elite university to think through the ways that university intervened in and “managed” the sit-in as an opportunity for more diversity and inclusion training, among other things. In this management, activism becomes incorporated into the university—in fact, becomes repositioned as an active *desire* of the university—in order to incorporate radical movements, manage critique, and reestablish the conditions of productive, *global* citizenship for which universities have now become active, if still contested, training grounds (Carey, 2016; Mohanty, 2003; Readings, 1996). Indeed, the institutional sanitization appearing at this time, and expanding from it, is largely in service of a restructured vision of the academy as one linked to productive, privatized, capitalist citizenship in the context of the rise and proliferation of neoliberalism and globalization.

The project of this paper is to first explore and attend to the particularly heteronormative and heterosexist formations of this university sanitization projects, located particularly within late 80s and early 90s queer student activism. To do so, this paper considers how queer university activism of and during the time bristled against, and in fact actively contested, these “cleaning” projects by confronting the presupposed *sanitary* operating logics of universities. Queer activist groups did so, as in the Dobbs Incident and the examples described later, through *dirtying* their respective campuses: putting up “obscene” posters; chalking on regularly traversed sidewalks, on university buildings. Throughout this paper, I think through how these activists maneuvers contested and illuminated particularly heteronormative spatial and citizenship logics of private elite universities; but also, in complex ways, through their critique and methods of critique, provided these universities with fodder for co-optation, control, and the reconsolidation of power and dominance along multiple lines (Harney & Moten, 2013; Ferguson, 2012).

### **Theoretical & conceptual frameworks:**

#### **Pure citizenship**

How do the particular national and cultural conditions of the time period bolster and work in alignment with the citizenship project of universities described above? To explain the heteronormative features and mechanisms of citizenship and “cleaning” with a critical queer lens, I gain theoretical inspiration from Berlant & Warner’s (1998) classic polemic, “Sex in Public.” In their work, they describe how national discourse, especially since the Reagan years in the 1980s, powerfully refastens sex to the stuff of an intimate, private sphere; even though that discourse everywhere dictates the structural, legal, juridical, political, and cultural forms of intimacy necessary for structural belonging, state protection, and national futurity. “*There is nothing more public than privacy,*” Berlant & Warner (1998) suggest (p. 547, emphasis original).



To describe this in part, they attend to the hegemonic workings of *national heterosexuality*: the powerful, discursive mechanism

by which a core national culture can be imagined as a sanitized space of sentimental feeling and *immaculate* behavior, a space of *pure citizenship*. A familial model of society displaces the recognition of structural racism and other systemic inequalities (p. 549, emphases added).

In other words, the prevailing logics of *pure citizenship* work to forge the cleaned ground of the national public sphere, within a broader supremacist state assembled through—and, in the 1980s, reinvigorated by—its reverence of privacy, property, family, and heterofamilial reproduction (Berlant, 1997; Berlant & Warner, 1998; Harris, 1993; Harris, 2006; Vaught, 2017; Habermas, 1989). This supremacist citizenship-project works in part through the national ideological construction of citizenship “as a condition of social membership produced by personal acts and values” (Berlant, 1997, p. 5). In other words, one’s participation in social life is dictated by one’s private actions, lives, or identities. All told, this structural maneuver means that national citizenship (and belonging) is refortified as the exclusive right of those with access to a private sphere unmediated or uncontrolled by the state: elite, White, hetero-nuclear families. This powerful discursive move is precisely what makes sex, and particularly queer sex and non-heteronormative sexual cultures, “matter[s] out of place” in their expression and operation in the public (Berlant & Warner, 1998, p. 553). This condition of belonging, so concludes Lauren Berlant (1997), has been continuously shrinking and privatizing since the 1980s, increasing and exacerbating inequities along race, gender, class, and sexuality.

In this paper, I deploy Berlant & Warner’s pure citizenship as a conceptual framework to map out the intricate ways heteronormativity structures the powered spatial and institutional

logics of the private university, rendering specifically queer modes of activism *obscene* in their publicity. As a prevailing logic of the university, pure citizenship is taken up in these specific stories to (1) purge expressions of sexual dissent and queer insurgency, and restore norms of citizenship dictated by universities; and (2) to strategically incorporate always-certain expressions of queerness into the administrative fold of these universities in order to “manage” dissent. Pure citizenship is an institutional logic, a publicly-mediated condition of inclusion, and a counterinsurgent tool of sanitation; one taken up in complex ways to act in alignment with a supremacist state that dictates familial modes of sex and intimacy as private, and protected, features of citizenship and futurity (Berlant, 1997).

Attending to purity, sanitization, or “cleanliness” (Carey, 2016) is generative in the specific stories told below not only because these illustrations link to phobic representations of *unclean* queer sexual cultures/bodies, but also because the stories told below feature quite literal acts of sanitization: erasing messages, removing posters, restoring campus idyll. Put simply: *Queers make a big mess of otherwise “pure” campus spaces*. In this paper, “pure” works as a contrast to what *queer* is, since queer disruption is constantly negotiated, disciplined, or erased in the name of *obscenity, dirtiness, excessiveness*. *Pure* and *queer* are inimical to each other—a structural antagonism that causes crisis responses throughout the stories I tell in this paper. Explained in the following section, I delineate how pure citizenship was activated in historical and temporal specificity through the widespread circulation of *obscenity* against queer people and cultures in the 1980s and 1990s.

### **Impure queers: Obscenity as national & cultural context**

None of the funds authorized to be appropriated for the National Endowment for the Arts or the National Endowment for the Humanities may be used to promote, disseminate, or

produce materials which ... may be considered **obscene**, including but not limited to, depictions of sadomasochism, homo-eroticism..." (*Congressional Record*, 1989, in Crimp, 2004, p. 157n4).

"Such **obscene** material should not be displayed in public." —Yale Herald article, 1994

In 1990, the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC) in Cincinnati and its director, Dennis Barrie, were charged with obscenity for displaying gay photographer Robert Mapplethorpe's controversial, homoerotic exhibit, *The Perfect Moment*. The exhibit included highly sexual and erotic nude photographs of mostly gay men, including shots of anal fisting and self-inserted bullwhips. Mapplethorpe had died of AIDS-related complications just months prior to the Grand Jury's decision. Citing the "Helms Amendment" put into circulation by famous anti-gay Senator Jesse Helms as well as the three-prong obscenity tests established by *Miller v. California* (1973), the Grand Jury chose to convict the CAC and its director:

The Grand Jurors ... do find and present that The Contemporary Arts Center and Dennis Barrie ... did, with knowledge of the character of the material involved, publicly display or exhibit the following [photographic] material ... any one or all of which are obscene (*City of Cincinnati v. Contemporary Arts Center*, 1990).

Here contributing to the "spectacular demonization of any represented sex" (Berlant & Warner, 1998, p. 550), this decision demonstrates the deep cultural, legal, state, and historical legacies of obscenity and the way it was (and still is) used as a codified and discursive tool to re-fortify heterofamilialism as a requisite condition of the supremacist US state—the stuff of pure citizenship. On the flip side of this, this legal decision shows the way homoeroticism, homoerotic cultures, and other "perverse" or dangerous sexualities along lines of race, gender, and class,

were condemned as part of a vast disciplinary project of the state (Crimp, 2004; Crenshaw, 1997; Mercer, 1991). In other words, obscenity is and has been used as a legal and cultural instrument of the state to define the conditions of private, citizenized belonging in the supremacist US.

To be sure, “obscenity” had been a state tool long before this particular historical moment. Critical historian Whitney Strub (2008) explores obscenity during the Cold War, arguing that obscenity charges during this time “operated precisely as enforcing agents of a normative regime of sexual politics predicated on the suppression of the noncompliant” which politically, legally, and conceptually conflated queer with obscene (p. 373). Although Strub contends that the legal conflation of obscenity and queerness waned in the 1970s, I suggest that it re-emerged overwhelmingly, if differently, in the 1980s and early 1990s as a state and cultural crisis response, as a way of intervening on the dynamics of widespread death and cultural production precipitated by visible queer sexual cultures and countercultural activism and artistic production in the face of HIV/AIDS (Crimp, 2004).

Specifically, I argue that “obscenity” reappeared as a weaponized feature of what many refer to as the “culture wars” of the 1980s and early 1990s—the Reagan/Bush years (Newfield, 2008; Berlant, 1997; Mercer, 1991). The “culture wars” became a comprehensive, militaristic mechanism for Reagan’s broad political and economic agenda, which sought to re-fortify White supremacist, heteronormative citizen-making at the birth and rise of neoliberalism in the early 80s. The moral-cultural ideologies emboldened in the culture wars were an irrefutably powerful method of restoring state power (even as the state was purportedly “hands-off” under Reagan and Bush) and widespread ideological support for racist, misogynistic, classist, xenophobic, and queerphobic politico-economic systems that were characteristic of the Reagan administration.

Many manifestations of the culture wars were lexiconic and representational. For example, the term “welfare queen” circulated images of poor Black women as negligent and careless, and in so doing garnered cultural and political support for the disassembling of welfare and public assistance (Roberts, 1997)—a key feature of racist neoliberal politics. Moreover, the representation of “crack whores” and “crack babies” in mainstream media helped facilitate the massive hypercriminalization and policing of Black communities via crack cocaine and dramatically bolstered the anti-Black carceral state during the 1980s and 90s, again by using misogynistic imagery of careless drug-addicted Black mothers (Roberts, 1997). The “culture wars” are hard to define precisely because they have neither a beginning nor end, and also because they became such a massive, ideological, national project of the time; nevertheless, these two above examples both showcase the ways that repressive labels circulated in the mainstream to bolster the prevailing morality of supremacist state systems and modes of governance.

During this time, I observe that *obscenity* also became a counterinsurgent state tool which operated in multiple capacities, including as legal codification as in the Dennis Barrie case above and multiple others (see Crenshaw, 1997; Mercer, 1991), and as colloquialism as in the stories I tell in this paper. Widely used and legally codified, obscenity was employed in multiple ways against those who were defiant of prevailing power structures and governing systems of norms, especially if that insurgency posed an aberrant sexual threat to the “pure” heterosexual regime of national cultures. In what follows, I focus on how obscenity was used as a catalyst to sanitize and administratively manage queer disruption at private universities, and explain more about that context in the following section.

**Institutional context(s):**

**Private, elite universities**

Following this historical context of “obscurity” and particularly how it related to projects of citizenship, I consider controversial incidents of “obscene” queer activism and subsequent institutional responses at three universities in the early 1990s: Yale University, Tufts University, and Smith College. I do so to understand how private universities, as elite bastions of citizenship-formation and production (Mohanty, 2003), take up larger state projects and reproduce prevailing power hierarchies and systems of exclusion and belonging (but always complicatedly).

In service of this point, there is an easy impulse to lump these three schools together under the broad banner of “private, elite colleges in the Northeast.” Indeed, all three universities inhabit reputations as elite, private institutions; they are expensive (now more than ever), exclusive and exclusionary, and predominantly White; they are all located in a similar geographic region, broadly. All three universities discussed here are dominant institutions, in a definitional sense: they operate largely in maintenance and protection of race, class, gender, and sexual power hierarchies, even as they are rife with possibility of radical knowledge production and activism (Mohanty, 2003). Moreover, despite their seeming autonomy from the state in the form of “private” institutions, they still act largely in alignment with and protection of state hegemony (James, 1996), as well as in collusion with larger national and transnational projects of a supremacist state (Mohanty, 2003), even as that relationship remains always tenuous, hegemonic, and contested both within and outside.

Yet, while vigorously similar in these ways, all three schools in fact occupy distinct and specific histories, locations, reputations, and relations to state power. Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut is elite in every sense of the word as one of the “Big Three” Ivy League schools. However, its elite status in relation to Harvard and Princeton has always been somewhat

contested, as Karen Ho (2009) notes, through its location in the majority Black, working-class city of New Haven, and thus Yale as an institution has always had to adjust or develop to combat this reputation. In relation to Yale, Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts occupies a somewhat subordinated “elite” status as a “wannabe Ivy” or as a school for Ivy Rejects. It does not occupy an identical cultural or political elitism as Yale, although it has grown increasingly elite and selective over the years. Smith College, in contrast to both Yale and Tufts, is a historically women’s college in Northampton, Massachusetts—a city known for its rich queer subcultures, particularly for lesbians and queer women. For this reason, Smith is not regarded on the same “elite” plane as Yale or even Tufts; it is always marked by its queer reputation and gendered specification. While it is not the work of this particular paper to tease apart the vast and specific histories of these three colleges much further, these brief comparative descriptions suggest that none of these schools, nor any “private, elite institution,” for that matter, can be said to operate on a plane of structural or instructional power that is, in any way, uniform or identical. Rather, while all elite, power-reproductive schools, they all have specific relations to the power and to maintaining (or, more rarely, disrupting) those structures.

An illustrative, all-too relevant example showcases what I mean by this. In 1987, the Yale University president repudiated Yale’s burgeoning reputation as the “Gay Ivy” in a now widely known letter to an angry alum. Five years later in 1992, the Smith College president largely refuted Smith College’s reputation as a “lesbian college” in a press release. In both presidential statements, the essential message is clear: We have queer students, but the attention to our schools *as* queer is exaggerated, false, and objectionable. Understood together, the accusations of Yale as a “gay” school and Smith as a “lesbian” college gesture to the cultural phobia and widely circulating threat of the “queer” label at this time (Crimp, 2004). Moreover,

the presidents' repudiations, in very similar ways, both signal the structural and historical conditions that necessitate the *repulsion* of an association with queerness in a heteropatriarchal state (Brown, 1992; Spade, 2015). Indeed, the mere fact that these accusations would garner protective responses from university presidents illuminates the institutional threat of being labelled in any way queer, especially during the ongoing HIV/AIDS epidemic which assisted the state in constructing "queer" as diseased or deadly. Both respond to these accusations by *necessarily* negating or warding off their schools' "exaggerated" queer labels, and in so doing reproduce the stigmatization of queerness in a heteropatriarchal state.

And yet, these presidents' repudiations do not operate within uniform relations to power. In the Yale president's response to an angry alum, he suggests that Yale is *not* a "gay school," and does so in protection of Yale's elite status as one of the Big Three (along with Harvard and Princeton), and perhaps also to contend with Yale's noted reputation as the "liberal" Ivy (or "Gay Ivy") in a majority Black city (Ho, 2009), both of which place it outside of normative Whiteness<sup>3</sup>. The Yale president has an elite, White, *heterosexual* reputation to protect—especially considering its fragile and competing relation to Harvard and Princeton, and in light of the particular temporal context and meaning of being labeled queer. Smith's president, on the other hand, does not have to contend with these particular "elite" relations in the same manner, yet she must contend with the historic devaluation of women and femme-centered education and knowledge production at historically women's colleges in ways that Yale's president obviously does not have to (Weber, 2016; Inness, 1997). Indeed, Smith's reputation as a "lesbian college" occurs within a structurally and virulently heteropatriarchal state that devalues many and most

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<sup>3</sup> Not to mention, the context of this letter was in response to Julie Iovine's angry and infamous article in the *Wall Street Journal*, "Lipstick and Lords: Yale's New Look." Iovine's article is famous for circulating and lamenting the facetious statistic, "1 in 4 maybe more," which accounts for the number of queer students at Yale.



forms of women-centered learning, activism, and community, especially when those communities are read as critical, or radical, or queer. In this way, Smith College has a complicated and *different* relation to the heteropatriarchal state than Yale University does: one that must always work against structural misogyny, and defend itself against the cultural degradation of women and femininity, writ large. In repudiating Smith's "lesbian" label, the Smith president defends the continued importance of educational spaces for women. Yet, in doing so, she acquiesces to the widespread stigmatization, threat, and phobia of the queer label and denies the very real and continuing histories of lesbian, bisexual, queer, and trans subcultures cultivated at Smith and in Northampton (Weber, 2016).

I expand on this specific example to showcase two important observations that are indispensable from the analyses developed below. First, despite their uniform statuses as private, elite universities that are largely affirmative of state hegemony, these schools occupy, in fact, quite uneven relations to power given their specific histories, demographics, and reputations. Second, the historical examples described in this section set the deep institutional context for the archival stories I detail below. In other words, the stories told and analyzed below occur within two institutional contexts that had *recently* repudiated their queer labels to a public face, and thus established the institutional conditions for belonging and dissent along heteronormative codes of citizenship.

### **Data: University archives**

The archival stories presented here, and the "facts" of their telling, were strung together through deep engagements with these universities' institutional archives and special collections. Methodologically, I approached archives as critical subjects; not just sites of knowledge retrieval but of knowledge production (Stoler, 2002; see also Carden & Vaught, 2016). This means that I

approached these archives not only as institutional sites of power legitimation—an awareness that they, themselves, are structured to support and maintain institutional memory—but also read them for the potentiality of resistance and rupture. The stories I tell and analyze below are the rather patchwork result of mining carefully through newspaper collections, letters and student journals, university correspondences, personal collections, posters, ephemera, photographs, meeting notes, student scholarship, and even offhand marginalia that was perhaps never meant to be viewed. That is, none of the stories discussed and analyzed below were told to me as pre-assembled, pre-packaged narratives, either from university administrators or community members. Instead, they are imbued with the biases of the numerous sources from which I gathered these data, as well as my own biases as a subjective, partial researcher. Readers of this should remain suspect of these realities of critical archival work.

### **Pure citizenship & its clean-up job**

In this section, I use pure citizenship as a conceptual guide to describe how universities erased, removed, or “cleaned up” queer disruption in these stories. To reiterate: pure citizenship acts upon, regulates, and contains incidents of sexual and/or queer dissent. The sanitization, I argue, may be placed within national citizenship-projects at the time, converging most powerfully around the privatization of citizenship as a requisite condition of productive membership. As such, I look to the complicated ways citizenship becomes actively and discursively mediated and continuously redefined as a privatized act—in these stories, constituted primarily in the private, (hetero)reproductive realm of the family or consumer, and not by critical, political participation in knowledge production and exchange. Specifically, I explore how these stories and the acts of sanitization, removal, or erasure that occur construct “obscenity” as inimical to proper, *clean* citizenship—creating institutional conditions of

unbelonging for those insurgent groups whose coalition-formation is untenable, while selectively incorporating permissible expressions of queerness as a way to reconsolidate administrative power (Ferguson, 2012).

Below I tell and analyze four different stories, in four separate sections. In the first section, I describe the aftermath of a 1994 chalking incident at Yale University, as seen and described by student journalists in the *Yale Daily News*. I describe how articles in the newspaper discursively reject and mediate these chalking events, setting the spatial conditions of belonging on Yale's campus. In the next section, I discuss the tension of "public" space in private universities as it is used to justify the erasure of queer activism at Tufts University in 1993 and again at Yale in 1994. In the third section, I consider how Admissions at Smith College in 1993 erased queer chalk around the Admissions building in protection of "prospective students and their parents," and what this might suggest about how both citizenship and queers are imagined within the college. Finally, in the last section, I discuss how these queer groups' admonishments and critiques of their universities became an opportunity to reconsolidate forms of domination located in administrative forms, by describing the aftermath of the Tufts event in 1993 and returning to the Dobbs Incident in 1989.

#### **"...no place on campus"<sup>4</sup>: Dirty words, dirtied campus**

In her work, Kristi Carey (2016) considers how universities reposition and incorporate acts of dissent back into daily operation through sanitizing them—making them palatable in the dominant image of the university. Yet, in the process of sanitization and cooptation, the university must also reject unsound activism: the "matters out of place" that radically threaten,

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<sup>4</sup> From: Billy, J. (1991, February 5). Dean of students office will investigate QUEER. *Tufts Daily*, pp. 1, 2. This is a quote from the Dean of Student Affairs at Tufts University in 1991. Although I do not discuss that particular story in this paper, this admonishment rings in my ears as I write this section.

or are untenable in, these institutions. This section considers: What activism has “no place on campus” (Billy, 1991)? And how does this rejection contribute to a formulation of belonging emanating in hegemonic definitions of private, proper, and productive citizenship? Finally, what effect does this have on defining and redefining campus space? To attend to these questions, this section explores the caustic, often anti-queer, discourse featured in the *Yale Daily News*, Yale’s preeminent student newspaper, in response to a specific incident that occurred in 1994. I explore how queer disruptions and “obscenities” at Yale University are depicted as dirty, impure, even *violent* acts—ones that pollute and transform these very campuses—and are rejected in opposition to “proper” university citizenship, the immaculate metrics of pure citizenship.

In March 1994 at Yale, and in celebration of the annual Bisexual, Gay, and Lesbian Awareness Day (BGLAD) at Yale, queer students chalked and posterred all around the campus, concentrating mostly on the Cross Campus lawn, a heavily traveled portion of the main campus. The messages written by queer students ranged from the more temperate and tolerance-seeking, like “Love can never be wrong” bordered by a pink triangle (which became ACT UP’s rallying symbol), to the more provocative and erotic, “Assimilate this big fat dildo” and “No dutch boy is going to plug up my dyke.” The day these chalkings and posters appeared, two scandalized graduate students took it upon themselves to erase what had been written. Equipped with mops, they took to the quad at Cross Campus, and began to wash away the chalkings.

The two students who mopped up the chalk had their critics, of course, but they also had overwhelming support. The rejection of “obscenities” happens in many ways, perhaps most saliently through the seemingly boundless collection of negative descriptions attached to the chalk and posters. Various, these incidents were described in student newspapers as “obscene,” “sexually explicit,” “vulgar,” “disgusting,” “abhorrent,” “pornographic,” “offensive,” “counter-

productive,” “excessive,” “explosive,” “distracting,” “antagonistic,” “confrontational,” “terrorism,” and as “battlegrounds” and “scars” and “casualties.”<sup>5</sup> Together, these words construct a corpus of unbelonging that draws rigid lines of appropriate and inappropriate expression—or, the proper ways of expressing dissent in universities. The conceptual framework of pure citizenship urges us to consider how heteronormativity (at least) structures and informs the logic of this erasure and sanitization. Indeed, Berlant & Warner (1998) argue that heterosexuality achieves its hegemonic structural connection to the state precisely through the supposed intimacy, or privacy, of sex and the institutions it is connected to, like citizenship, reproduction, family, marriage, and home. Thus, the heterosexuality of national belonging is cloaked by its very construction as intimate—not a concern for the public, the presumed metric of citizenship. This is in explicit operation in the ways the queer chalkings are described in such revolted and revolting detail. The queer chalkings expose that which is ostensibly an issue of the private sphere, that privileged space of citizenship and reproduction. In turn, that exposure is mediated as obscene, an affront to the campus community.

Beyond mere description, some newspaper articles suggest that the “obscene” chalkings pollute campus to such a point that campus becomes something else entirely. These spatial illustrations are used both to define how queer obscenities pollute campuses through erotic imagery and excess, *and also* to justify what is and should be normal, aesthetically, for a private elite campus. That is, these descriptions doubly construct the conditions of belonging and unbelonging in and through spatial designation. For instance, one Yale student, noting the bright, clearly offending, campus topography rendered by the queer chalking, wrote:

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<sup>5</sup> Most of these descriptions were taken from *Yale Daily News* articles. I also included some words from Smith’s newspaper, *The Sophian*, and Tufts’ newspaper, the *Tufts Daily*.

“With neon colored chalk covering the sidewalks last week, Cross Campus lawn looked more like Times Square at night than [sic] part of a college campus.” (Srinivasan, 1994, p. 1)

This quote puts the private, pristine, elite space like Yale at direct odds with the gaudy, trashy, public-ness of Times Square. But what is likely just a wise-cracking jab written by this student journalist actually eclipses the deeper histories of subversive gay sexual practices and queer cultural development within Times Square, specifically—subversive cultures that were destroyed as “safety concerns” led the way for the corporatization, and widespread suburban tourism, of the urban center (Delany, 1999; Halberstam, 2005). That is, there are reasons why Times Square and Yale University, as disparate spaces imbued with powered, geopolitical meaning, are placed upon this moral-aesthetic fulcrum: on one end, there is/was a space where queer men, across lines of race and class, developed an intricate, if still imperfect, sexual subculture in porn shops and X-rated movie theatres; on the other end, at the Ivy League school, there exists a space where that practice is interpreted as obscene, trashy, out of place. In constructing this binary spatial opposition between Times Square and Yale, then, the chalkings become that imagined “obscene” site—the stand-in Times Square, or wherever else—that, through other students’ and administrators’ disapproval, rearticulate powered lines of belonging, which altogether reaffirm the spatial cues of acceptability and respectability at the elite university.

There were other spatial comparisons in circulation—ones made under the banner of restoring a pristine campus aesthetic. Multiple student journalists at Yale draw comparison to the presence of the chalking and brutal acts of war. In effect, these comparisons portray the Cross Campus lawn at Yale as an otherwise peaceful, unperturbed, “neutral” site that had been transformed into a terrain of figurative, aesthetic combat:

“Anyone seeing the walkways, a literal battleground of words, might have wondered whether Yale students had a better means of communicating with one another”

(Srinivasan, 1994, p.1)

“In the past two weeks, the walkways around the Cross Campus lawn have become a virtual battleground for students fighting with chalked slogans” (Phillips, 1994, p. 1)

“It’s a war that’s not going to be won, and the casualty is the appearance of the campus,”

(Srinivasan, 1994, p.7)

*“Obscene posters scar campus”* (Cooper & Steinglass, 1994)

“BGLAD’S explosion of sidewalk graffiti is an affront to the Yale community and to the movement itself” (Kaplan, 1994, p. 8).

So many of the chalkings, as shown here, were positioned in the regulatory grammar of war, battle, casualty, damage, and violence. The comparisons to battlegrounds, to combat, or to bodily wounds uncover, too, implicit universal truths about what college campuses are supposed to look like: politically and aesthetically “neutral”; untampered by this visual, gaudy disturbance; idyllic, pure. Yet, these articles suggest that these queer “obscenities” transform campus into something else entirely: something ugly, violent, unproductive. These comparisons expose, and discursively construct, public displays of queerness as injurious to the normative conditions of university campuses; *and* it is to expose those normative conditions *as* normative. Moreover, registered saliently through the comparisons to war—“*the casualty is the appearance of campus*”—is a paternalistic protection of university space, wherein the campus itself is rendered the innocent and passive victim of political warfare and violence. The logic undergirding these protective moves positions the disruptive queer chalking—or queer sexual expression, by proxy—as an antagonistic threat to what *should be* proper decorum for university spaces like Yale, especially

in early 90s, when queerness still presented such a (phobic) threat to the health and safety of communities across context. Here, protection of campus precipitates, and justifies, erasure; it is the seemingly agreed-upon rejection of threatening dissent.

Central to both of the above comparisons—to Times Square and to war—is that the mediation of belonging at these universities has specifically spatialized components. In other words, pure citizenship is centrally a project of cleaning up actual, lived space (in these stories, university campuses) (see also Hanhardt, 2013). Berlant & Warner (1998) similarly describe the effects of a hegemonic heterosexual culture on crafting the immaculate *space* of pure citizenship. They describe how the logics of heteronormativity, inherited in the state and proliferated through law, politics, and culture, have the powerful effect to reshuffle and redefine *space* in protection of privatized (heterosexual, White) citizenship rights. To make their case, they point to re-zoning laws in New York City in the mid-to-late 1990s, and those laws' corrosive effects on the development of specifically queer sexual subcultures on Christopher Street in Manhattan. One of the many effects of this rezoning, which pushed queer sexual cultures to the margins of the city, is “a sense of isolation and diminished expectations for queer life, as well as an attenuated capacity for political community” (Berlant & Warner, 1998, p. 552). Certainly, the erasure of chalk on elite college campuses and New York City re-zoning laws are different, and must be marked through their specificity and context: they are not the same thing, and do not have the same structural effect. And yet, their political effects derive from similar systems and sources of power; and part of what I argue here, following Berlant and Warner, is that these systems of power have fundamentally spatial components. Power marks and defines space, and citizenship is in part about spatial belonging—the ability to develop and live in space. The corpus of



descriptive rejection appearing in the *Yale Daily News* like a wildfire, in part, marks this space and who belongs in it.

### **“Public” spaces in private places**

Yet (and even though “Fags must die” was spray-painted on Yale’s campus a week following the 1994 chalking incident<sup>6</sup>) these campuses cannot be labeled, explicitly, “heterosexual.” This would break the liberal codes of diversity and inclusion that have come to define these universities, institutionally and administratively (Ferguson, 2012). Instead, to justify the erasure of queer chalk, campus space is constructed, defined, managed, and made intelligible through other, more oblique, vocabularies. In these stories, queer “obscenities” are erased multiple times in protection of space deemed *public*. Let us put aside for the moment that calling anything “public” within institutions like Yale, Tufts, and Smith is a ruse.<sup>7</sup> Instead, in this section, I attend to the ways “public” is powerfully constructed and ordained by universities through a presumed unity of private individuals, within a context *already* marked by increasing privatization as a barometer of productive citizenship (Mohanty, 2003; Giroux, 2002). I argue here that “public” space on private university campuses is constructed in part through powerful ideological and material reverence of the private. In doing so, I explicate how not only is there “nothing more public than privacy” (Berlant & Warner, p. 547), but how there is nothing more *private* than the ideologies mediating public space.

At Tufts in 1993, the Tufts, Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community (TLGBC) chalked messages in celebration of National Coming Out Day and in anticipation of an upcoming prospective students’ day. By morning, though, and before many had gotten a chance to see it,

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<sup>6</sup> Note, here, the glaring difference between spray-paint and chalk.

<sup>7</sup> When I stayed with a friend at Yale while doing archival work there, I learned that Yale closes its gates to the residential quad past a certain hour, which in the day is open for anyone. At night, only those with active Yale IDs can enter. Is that space public?

the chalk was erased. At first, it was unclear who erased it or when the erasure happened. Weeks later, however, the Dean of Admissions wrote an apology letter, suggesting that a new Admissions officer had mistook the chalkings for anti-gay slurs and had the chalk immediately removed. Regardless of the message of chalks (whether pro- or anti-gay), the Tufts president supported the erasure because of its appearance in a “public” area. Indeed, he asserted that no group, regardless of political orientation, could chalk on the grounds specifically around and between the main Administrative building, Ballou Hall, and the Admissions building, Bendetson Hall—precisely where the queer group chalked ahead of a prospective students’ open house.<sup>8</sup> Here, the defense of “public” space stands as a protection of the preexisting spatial and aesthetic conditions of Tufts’ Academic Quad, a presumably apolitical, neutral space; undisrupted by any insurgent opinion.

There is a seeming tension embedded in the protection of “public” spaces that are marked by privacy and, increasingly, by processes supporting and governing privatized citizenship. This tension grows even murkier given how the queer “obscenities” are erased precisely *because* of their publicity—because they disturb the privacy of normative, reproductive sexuality and intimacy, protected in a heterofamilial sphere. Indeed, in both a national and institutional context historically marked through the exclusive protection of the private sphere (Berlant & Warner, 1998; Berlant, 1997; Vaught, 2017; Habermas, 1989), there is an interesting, repeated protection of space marked as public. But, what does public space, in this markedly private context, mean; and, how is it used to mediate dissent?

It is true, as Berlant & Warner (1998) insist, that there is “nothing more public than privacy” (p. 547). This means that privacy—and the powered institutions, ideologies, laws, and

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<sup>8</sup> I checked with the Director of the Office of Campus Life, who told me no codified restrictions like this currently exist in the chalking policy. I am unclear if this was or was not true in 1993.

social practices formed around and in protection of privacy as it is attached to citizenship—are indeed publicly constructed and mediated, that the grounds of pure citizenship are paved with an apparatus of public interjection. And yet, here, this might also be said to working, in tandem, in the other direction: that there is nothing more *private* than the public; that “public” space (attached to a private elite context), is constructed by a powered, if imagined, collection of private, propertied citizens who dictate and form what *is* or can be public in their own interest. This idea (that the public is private) has classical roots in Jürgen Habermas’ theoretical development of the “bourgeois public sphere,” which, even though originally (in eighteenth century Europe) formed in critical opposition to state power, was still constructed through the assembly of propertied, private citizens originating from a conjugal sphere (Habermas, 1989; Vaught, 2017; Warner, 2002). This changed as the modern state developed, increasingly assembling and concentrating state power in forms of capitalist bureaucracy and mass media. This eroded a critical public and forged a more direct relationship between elite (White) privates and the state (Vaught, 2017). I suggest that the ruse of “public” space in private, elite universities should be seen in fact as a discursive spatial construction, ordained by the university, that defends those values emanating in the exclusive private sphere, where the rights of reproduction, and intimacy inhere in and protect exclusive rights to citizenship (Berlant & Warner, 1997). Thus, the construction of public space protects and serves the presumed needs of an ostensibly unitary collection of private citizens, whose value and, indeed, *citizenship* emanates from that private sphere. And this construction is what mediates and justifies the erasure of “obscene” queer chalk as out of place; indeed, those “obscenities” loudly mark certain bodies and sexual cultures as offensively public in a public governed through privatized logics.

Consider another example which even more explicitly triangulates “public” space, private citizens, and the state. In response to the chalkings at Yale in 1994, as well as a series of posters hung around campus, two student journalists furiously wrote:

The presentation of such material violates *our* rights to enjoy public places or take strolls around campus .... Furthermore, the children who frequent campus should not be exposed to such explicit acts. Children mature at their own pace and it should be left to parents or guardians to decide when is an appropriate time to introduce concepts of sexuality. This decision should not be made by some radical undergraduate fringe movement ... Legally, such posters meet the Connecticut state statute’s criteria for obscenity... (Cooper & Steinglass, 1994)

In this article, the idea of public space gets defined through a contract between private citizens (“*our* rights”) and the state (imagined, legally, through Connecticut law). In this powered funnel between private citizens and the state, public space is made a place of institutional access for those *already* with rights, a protection of the extant right to enjoy space freely. As Vaught (2017) writes, in a structurally liberal society, “the ethics of free will demand that society and law protect the *pursuit of happiness*, not give it. Those protections live in the legal form of rights. Rights, too, are private and are exclusive” (p. 51, emphasis in original). In the article above, “*our* rights to enjoy” space is defined and defended through citing obscenity law. The queer chalk (discursively illegal, *vis-à-vis* Connecticut state’s obscenity law) disturbed those preordained rights—that unattenuated access to space that comes with private citizenship. And as such, it becomes an institutional context of unbelonging for queers and queer dissent, at the very least. In sum, “public” space is not a widely available or accessible thing. It is, rather, a locale where people already predisposed to the rights of citizenship get to “enjoy” and “take strolls.”

The link between private enjoyment of public space is made even more powerful in the quote above through the imagined Child, a racially-specific (read: White) and cogent national symbol quite often used to bolster the nation and its reproductive future, at the expense of a wide variety of marginalized groups (Meiners, 2016; Edelman, 2004; Berlant, 1997). The Child, in its overwhelming symbolic capacity, has been called upon in many ways historically: to expand the carceral state (Meiners, 2016), to obstruct public funding to queer artists (Crimp, 2004), and, in this *Yale Daily News* article, to construct a sanitary and sexually “appropriate” space formed intimately around a protection of children from the wretched grasp of a “radical undergraduate fringe movement.” Indeed, in this moment, queer insurgency is erased in the protection of a sanitized, heteroreproductive nation linked through the aspirational vessel of its future: children. Here, that national symbology seeps into an elite university campus, constructing a fulcrum between the national future (the Child) and those who are seen to be injurious to such a future (queers). Through prevailing logics of what constitutes an immaculate public, the space of pure citizenship, queer activism is once again inappropriate, out of place, dirty.

### **Elite admissions, obscenity, and prospective families**

The same year that [Smith] overturned its need-blind admissions policy, it released the Smith ‘Design for Diversity.’ How can the College claim to hold diversity as its number one priority in community living while deliberately returning to an elitist, exclusionary admissions policy? ... Who are the women who have been turned down based solely on their inability to pay? What color were they? Did they have a disability? What was their sexual orientation? (Association of Low Income Students, 1993)

In February 1993, the Association of Low Income Students (ALIS) at Smith College published an open letter to the Smith community, an excerpt of which is shown above.

Condemning Smith's false institutional commitment to "diversity" alongside its recent decision to revoke its need-blind admissions policy, the ALIS letter illuminates the ways that private, elite universities preserve elitism through (at least) class exclusion while falsely committing to other forms of "diversity" among their predominantly White student bodies (see Ahmed, 2012; Mohanty, 2003). The ALIS letter illustrates with indignation the exclusive and elitist material apparatuses upon which private, elite educational institutions are able to maintain and reproduce themselves, even as those universities host community conversations and inclusion programs (like Smith's "Design for Diversity") that seem to shed light on or even contradict those very systems. Indeed, administrative programs promoting "diversity and inclusion" are one such intense and complex contradiction at institutions that historically protect and sustain systems of powered exclusion (Ahmed, 2012).

The ALIS letter and the contradictions it reveals about Smith College forebodes, in many ways, a tense event that occurs between Smith Admissions and the Lesbian Bisexual Alliance the following school year in October 1993. Through that event, described more below, I think through the ways that *sexuality* becomes an institutional matter of "diversity" both regulated and productively managed during and after a chalking incident that took place at Smith. In analyzing this event, I consider how always-certain forms of queerness, here understood as a manageable form of "diversity," get grasped and sanctioned by university administrations, while others (like institutionally-defined "obscenities") are purged to protect broader institutional functions, like tuition-recruitment and future student investment. Here, I observe how this plays out symbolically in and around the Smith Admissions building, which becomes a site of contestation after members of the Lesbian Bisexual Alliance chalk around and on it. I pose these considerations in relation to pure citizenship, which sanitizes sexual dissent, and instead

privileges privatized forms of belonging through “intimacy and familialism” that is “restricted to generational narrative and reproduction” (p. 554). Ultimately, I show how the sanctioning of certain expressions of queerness comes at the cost of regulating, mediating, and containing disruptive forms of activism at Smith College, all to preserve future recruitments and their presumed needs.

In celebration of National Coming Out Week and in the context of a recent and widely noticed uptick of queerphobic incidents taking place at and around Smith, the Lesbian Bisexual Alliance chalked around campus, including on and around the Admissions building. Queer students in the LBA chalked messages such as, “Fuck your gender!”, “Cunt Pride,” “Our love – you can’t wash it away,” “I eat pussy,” and “Men suck.” Upon seeing these messages, multiple constituencies at Smith, students and administrators alike, voiced their utter disapproval of the messages drawn—including the Director of Admission, who ultimately ordered the chalkings removed. After the incident and the removal of the chalk, the Associate Dean of Student Affairs and Residence called multiple follow-up meetings with the LBA in order to address both sides’ concerns with the erasure of the chalkings.

Ultimately, multiple members of the Smith administration resolved the incident. After the follow-up meetings, the Dean of Enrollment wrote a letter to the LBA to summarize their meetings together, and offer somewhat of an institutional olive branch. In a letter set in official Smith letterhead, the Dean of Enrollment tells the LBA to consider more “effective ways” of expressing their dissent, “keeping in mind the sensitivity of dealing with visitors and prospective students and their parents.” That letter, though, is not simply an admonishment, but a clarification: only the “obscene and sexually-explicit words chalked on the walkways and porch of the new [Admissions] building” were meant to be erased, even though all of it was.

This letter is instructive of the ways “obscenity” is used to mark powered boundaries of belonging in universities—here, along lines of both normative gender and sexual expression. To do so, the letter imagines a critical opposition between “obscene and sexually-explicit” writing and the “prospective students and their parents” to whom these activists are told to be sensitive. I would argue that not just any prospective student/family is conjured to mediate and admonish the Lesbian Bisexual Alliance for their “obscene” chalking. Rather, it is a specific version of a *nuclear* family (“students and their parents”): the potential, moneyed, lucrative consumers at Smith College, and politically and morally opposed (at least in Admissions’ view) to the obscenities written in chalk. Thus, the image of “prospective students and their parents” conjured by the Dean of Enrollment performs as a stand-in for the political values protected in the private, conjugal, heterofamilial sphere (Berlant & Warner, 1998), the values that then justified, mediated, and sanitized the walkways around the Smith Admissions Building.

As mentioned, Berlant & Warner (1998) suggest that a secure relation to futurity is constructed in and through “generational narrative and reproduction” (p. 554). This is, in part, how heteronormativity governs wide-reaching forms of reproduction and protection inherited in the state (e.g., marriage), law (e.g., citizenship rights), medicine (e.g., access to health care), and many others (Berlant & Warner, 1998). Admissions at an elite university similarly operates on a mode of reproduction through their central task to recruit future students—the best and the brightest. In this logic, it is clear to see how queer obscenities bristle against the mission of Smith as an institution of continuous tuition-recruitment. The erasure of the chalk *in protection* of prospective students makes an assurance that Smith is an institution where future-citizens are cultivated and produced, productively and appropriately. The “obscenities” threaten this institutional goal. Instead, they craft a queer activist culture at Smith generally and defiantly



disinterested in the broad-stated objectives of reproduction, normative familialism, and productivity. Thus, through their rejection of these normative modes of belonging, the “obscenities” written in chalk around the Admissions building antagonize the lucrative future of and investment in Smith College as a future-bent, tuition-recruiting institution—imagined, as in the Dean of Enrollment’s letter, through a conjured nuclear family.

Yet, the Administration does not operate through sheer rejection of dissent, and more often than not, neither do the logics of pure citizenship. That is, the Dean of Enrollment does not tell the Lesbian Bisexual Alliance to cease to exist entirely, but rather to consider more “effective” ways of conveying their activism and dissent. This takes place within an already-existing clarifying narrative in the Dean of Enrollment’s letter: that *only* the obscene and sexually-explicit words were meant to be erased, not all of them (like, “Love can never be wrong!”). This speaks to how sexuality, or a selected or selective version of it, is taken up and incorporated within the university in certain, sanitized ways: as a normative mode of difference (Ferguson, 2012), though complicatedly (discussed more in the following section). It also doles out the forms of acceptable behavior and belonging for queer women at Smith, not least in the early 90s—just one year after the president refuted Smith’s label as a lesbian college. Crimp (2004) writes, “I would argue that what we [queers] do *sexually* is the root cause of the hatred directed at us and, moreover, that many arguments for tolerance . . . attempt to obfuscate that sexuality (p. 277, emphasis in original). Crimp (2004) goes on to discuss the representation of lesbians in a made-for-television film, suggesting that Glenn Close’s sympathetic performance as a model military woman and mother in *Serving in Silence* is predicated on her character’s “lesbianism [as] a matter of identity, not sexuality, of identity not in any way based on sexuality” (p. 277). In the 1993 story at Smith, while sexuality gets taken up, and tenuously supported, as a

productive institutional matter, it must necessarily be taken up as an identity, and not sexual, form. In this institutional maneuver, Smith provides a false choice to its queer students: self-regulate your behavior, or be subjugated through erasure or sanitization. This false choice becomes intelligible through pure citizenship, an institutional project hell-bent on the privatization of citizenship, intimacy, and the emulation of generational futurity.

### **Lip service: Dissent, institutionality, and university policy**

The previous sections have demonstrated the complex discursive mechanisms by which queer “obscenity” is rejected and erased from their campus communities. The last section began to show how this mediation occurs both through erasing and condemning queer student activists, but also through productively “managing” and sanctioning acceptable forms. Following this, this final section explores in more detail how part of the sanitization of queer activism is not, in fact, pure rejection or erasure—but selective incorporation as a form of administrative management and reconsolidation of university power.

In his critical work on the history of insurgent scholarly and activist movements in the US academy, Roderick A. Ferguson (2012) describes how such modes of dissent have been forcefully normalized through administrative cooptation and absorption. In what he calls the “will to institutionality,” Ferguson (2012) describes how dissent is said to achieve effectiveness, traction, and legitimacy through its appeal to institutional forms; but that this compulsion to institutionalize difference, as it becomes seemingly the *only* option, simply bolsters forms of domination constitutive of the academy (see also Harney & Moten, 2013). While these stories certainly demonstrate nuance to this argument (the chalked slogan “Assimilate this big fat dildo,” at Yale seems generally disinterested in institutionality), I also argue that these chalk acts indeed became hegemonic fodder for Yale, Tufts, and Smith to strengthen and reinstate their powered

codes of belonging—absorbing and taming queerness in the process; purging it of its untenable obscenity. This happened, as I demonstrate below, through the university’s incorporation and mediation of more legible, productive, and always-certain expressions of queerness, in service of the larger project to define the hegemonic boundaries of pure citizenship.

All of these incidents, without fail, concluded with some administrative actor (e.g., the president; Dean of Admissions) somehow justifying the chalk erasure while embracing that university’s queer population in newly expressed, and controlled, forms. Furthermore, almost all of these incidents concluded in a queer group’s admonishment of the university: *do better*.<sup>9</sup> Together, this institutional push-and-pull describes a complex process by which universities are able to incorporate dissent as a form of management and containment; reproducing, in the process, their institutional power and the forms of domination that undergird them. This is part of what Carey (2016) describes as university “cleaning,” and how I argue universities remain strict control over their definitions of citizenship and belonging. For instance, after the 1993 chalk erasure incident at Tufts University, the Tufts Lesbian Gay Bisexual Community wrote an indignant letter in the *Tufts Daily*,

By erasing these messages, it made [TLGBC] invisible to prospective students, their parents, and the Tufts Community as a whole ... TLGBC is a senate funded group, and we should be accorded the same rights given to other such groups. We hope that in the future, TLGBC is given more respect from the Tufts community as a whole (Miller et al., 1993, p. 2)

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<sup>9</sup> While institutional affirmation is certainly power-reproductive, I am careful here not to produce a simplistic critique of these queer groups and other marginalized groups, either. Throughout this research, I thought often of critical race scholar Patricia J. Williams’ (1991) reminder that “rights are islands of empowerment” for marginalized groups, and that dominant institutions have the power to afford, deny, or take away resources for those historically deprived of them. People need resources to live well. It is easy, thirty years later, to critique; it is more difficult to understand the conditions of subjugation specific to that time.

To TLGBC's rebuke, the Dean of Admissions wrote an apology letter in the *Tufts Daily*:

It is unfortunate and regretted that what was meant as an effort to remove an anti-gay attack became itself an affront to members of our community. We are fortunate to be one of the few universities in the country to have a university-sponsored office working with all members of the community to assist people in a better understanding of issues relating to sexual orientation and offering support, advice and assistance (Cuttino, 1993, p. 2)

In both the queer group's rebuke and in the Dean of Admissions' apology, there is a reconcentration of power in the university's ability to manage, define, and afford rights and power to, queer groups. The university is, then, positioned as the legitimating body that affords rights; that has the power to dole out respect, support, and validity to (in this case) queer groups. In short, the university becomes the institutional body where queerness is both authorized and managed. The Dean of Admission's letter shows how this complex institutional process occurs. Even as it is framed as an apology to the queer group, the Dean of Admissions actually gets to *define the purpose* of queer students (and the LGBT Center) on campus: which is, to "assist people in a better understanding of issues related to sexual orientation." In this discursive gesture, queerness is invited into the university insofar as it becomes a tool and pedagogy of diversity and inclusion for the general Tufts public; the Dean of Admissions explains how queer students should exist and for whom, and congratulates the university for establishing one of the country's first resource centers. In what might be described as a "will to institutionality" (Ferguson, 2012), queerness becomes legitimated and managed in and through the university: ultimately, the university is the benevolent force of incorporation, even as it continues to produce the conditions of erasure and exclusion exhibited in these stories.

As a final example, I return to the Dobbs Incident, which opened this paper. If there is complexity in negotiating incorporation and rejection, the Dobbs Incident might be the quintessential example of such. The events of the Dobbs Incident illuminated, in full force, how Yale University operates on systems of domination, predicated *at least* on heterosexism. It also demonstrated how private elites (Yale) establishes affirmative relations with the state (the New Haven police) in order to quell insurgence, to clean up dissent. Yet, its aftermath demonstrates how the call for institutional recognition often registers a reconsolidation of that power in newer, nicer forms—in ways that refortify boundaries of exclusion and secures forms of domination constitutive of that exclusion.

In the days following the arrest of nine gay men, and after a series of follow-up plenary meetings, the queer protesters at the conference published a list of demands for the Yale administration and for the City of New Haven. “The Yale administration has so far paid lip service to lesbian and gay rights,” the demands read. “It must now take action and responsibility.” The demands included dropping the charges against Bill Dobbs, urging the President of Yale to make a public statement condemning institutional homophobia and police violence, and ordering the Yale president to make a public statement affirming the right of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people to, “express their sexuality freely in print, photo, word and deed, both on and off campus.” The demands also required the Yale president to acknowledge and officially recognize the importance of the Lesbian and Gay Studies Center. The Yale president’s response, conveyed in a press conference, was to implement new policy—including an “enhanced program for the concerns of gays and lesbians” (Wilgoren, 1989, p. 1). This included “better” crowd control training for the Yale police, as well as to clarify police procedures when interacting with potentially “obscene” materials.

This negotiation between the Yale administration and the Dobbs activists showcases how dissent is incorporated and managed in universities, and how this management fortifies relations of power within them. Here, it occurs chiefly through the implementation of new, progressive policy. Yet, policy, Harney & Moten (2013) warn, “is a correction ... Policy distinguishes itself from planning by distinguishing those who dwell in policy and fix things from those who dwell in planning and must be fixed” (p. 78). In other words, policy is a remedial tool of a university; a legitimation of its admittedly imperfect and uncorrected, yet immanently fixable, forms of domination. Policy suggests progress; it quells radical dissent through ameliorative tactics.

In the aftermath of the Dobbs Incident, the implementation of policy accomplishes three main things to reconsolidate dominant university power. First, it makes institutionally legible the forms of dissent that were perhaps originally meant to defy or resist legibility (through Dobbs’ posters’ self-aware yet elusive shock-value; detached from discernible authorship until he is caught). Indeed, following activist demands, the Yale president’s response to the Dobbs Incident is to sponsor programs for the awareness and concerns of gays and lesbians. Yet, in this university-controlled act, queerness acts as an institutionalized category of normative difference (Ferguson, 2012), one that can be rendered an object of pedagogy, of teaching and awareness. In effect, though, that absorption seeks to make institutionally “knowable” or “teachable” as *identity*, forms of life that have historically gained such insurgent power through their opposition to stable modes of knowing (Halberstam, 2005; Ferguson, 2012). Moreover, as Ferguson (2012) notes, the taking-up of “sexual orientation” as an institutional mode of difference isolates sexuality as a single-identity issue, and separates it forcefully from the critiques of heteropatriarchy and racism that had been an establishing political feature of the gay liberation movement—instead, rendering sexuality an individual, liberal identity politic that becomes

marked through an unquestioned Whiteness in its administrative presence. Not least in predominantly White and elite schools, this means that an institutional space, like an LGBT Center, with all probability gets built through a single-identity frame of power, rather than with attention to the vast intersections of queerness (see Cohen, 1997).

Second, the implementation of university policy bolsters and re-legitimizes the role of Yale's police force through sensitivity training and clarification of its arrest procedures. The legitimation of Yale's police presence is at *least* ironic in relation to the police's role in raiding, harassing, and arresting nine members of the conference; at *most*, it is a threatening expansion of surveillance for those for whom increased police presence is not at all a promise of safety, but perhaps quite the opposite. In consideration of the violent history of policing of queer communities, communities of Color, and in their intersections (e.g., the Stonewall Riots that precipitated the gay liberation movement), this becomes especially fraught institutional maneuver (Stewart-Winter, 2015; Hanhardt, 2013). For whom is the legitimation of a police force a form of protection and for whom did this spark further marginalization—even *within* the queer student and activist population? How, as Ferguson (2012) helps us understand, does the institutionalization of sexuality separate sexuality from critical structures of race and gender? Indeed, the implementation of policy to “make improvements” to the Yale police around issues of sexuality bolsters the administrative and surveilling power of university law enforcement, broadly, and takes up sexuality within an already institutionally White framework (Ahmed, 2012).

Finally, the implementation of policy after the Dobbs Incident simply reinstates the university's ability to define what is and is not obscenity. Ironically, this was what the Dobbs Incident was meant to contest, and ostensibly what the implementation of “sensitivity training”

for police and education for the campus community was meant to counter. Yet, as the Yale president stated in a 1989 press conference, the right to free speech for *all* groups should be protected, but: ““We can’t view Yale as a sanctuary where we can break laws,”” (Wilgoren, 1998, p. 3), citing state laws that regulate obscenity. That is, he affirms the right of free speech for all groups, so long as those groups adhere to the legal statutes of state obscenity laws—which, as I have delineated above, have discriminatory and deleterious effects on queer people, not least at this time period (Crimp, 2004; Mercer, 1991). So, as sexuality was grasped and fortified as an institutional matter of education and awareness, the president retained the right to dictate those forms of dissent that are, or are not, obscene. The clean-up and regulation of dissent—the institutional control of belonging—continues, forebodingly.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have articulated a conceptual framework called pure citizenship to attend to the ways universities sanitized or erased queer “obscenities” at three schools in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Through pure citizenship, I have thought alongside Berlant & Warner’s “Sex in Public” to consider the particular ways universities sanitize queer dissent to reestablish the normative parameters of citizenship in institutions increasingly governed by logics of capitalist productivity and privatization (Carey, 2016; Mohanty, 2003; Giroux, 2002). I have also suggested that sanitization not only occurs as an active rejection of “obscene” queer expression, but as a matter of selective institutional incorporation in order to mediate belonging. This selective incorporation makes queerness legible as an administrative matter of normative difference (Ferguson, 2012), and ultimately reconsolidates forms of domination inherited in the academy. I offer *pure citizenship* as but *one* way to explain how universities bolster their institutional control at the expense of forms of resistant queer political collectivity. All told, I



have begun to map out the ways supposedly “autonomous” private institutions are not actually autonomous, but formed and continually maintained in the service of the state and its White private elites; that clean space of citizenship in a nation founded on exclusion and violence.

This paper has furthered and elaborated a critical theoretical framework, and invites others to take it up, expand on it, and refine it. I see multiple distinct possibilities to further the conversation begun in this work. The first is to dig deeper into the history of university queer activist groups at this time. In my focus on theorizing universities as vehicles of sanitation and dominance, I have momentarily put aside an important critique or deeper understanding of queer activist groups within elite spaces. How might their methods and modes of activism, especially within elite White spaces, reproduce the unquestioned centrality of Whiteness or offer a gender-dominant or binaried frame of single-issue queer politics? In other words, how is queer activism in private, White, elite spaces, too, limited by the exclusivity, narrowness, and elitism of its context; how might its critiques of the university actually fortify its exclusive boundaries? Second, I invite the possibility of exploring pure citizenship in categorically different modes of activism on university campuses. How might pure citizenship and its logic of immaculate university space work across activist and group context? And, how have the governing logics of “cleanliness” (Carey, 2016) changed across time, if at all?

To this last question, I suggest a third possibility engendered through this paper: a sharper historicization of the contemporary moment in queer politics. This is, in fact, why I took up this archival project in the first place—as a way to understand the conditions of the present; to *go back* as a way of locating myself now. Indeed, this is a direct impetus for what Kate Eichhorn (2013) calls the “archival turn” in feminist and queer politics: a turn to the past to “restore to us what is routinely taken away under neoliberalism—not history itself but rather the ability to

understand the conditions of our everyday lives longitudinally” (p. 6; see also, Love, 2007; Hilderbrand, 2006). The 1980s and early 90s are a watershed moment in queer politics—indeed, it is when “queer” became attached to a political movement at all. Yet, beginning in the early 90s and expanding thereafter is the broad push for state recognition and rights in the forms of marriage equality and military inclusion, to name a few (Spade, 2015; Harris, 2006; Duggan, 2003; Crimp, 2004; Sycamore, 2012). Converging increasingly around modes and politics of state incorporation, queer politics (or, LGBT politics) became steadily measured by its ability to assimilate into the mainstream, advocating for inclusion that more often than not refortified systems of race, gender, and sexual domination foundational to a White heteropatriarchal state (Spade, 2015). It is not lost on me in a paper formed around pure citizenship that, now, many queers (along specific lines of race and class) have fuller citizenship rights than they did when these stories took place; incorporated, as certain queers have been, into the fold of the nation.

As these modes of incorporation take increasing hold, consolidating obvious race, class, and gender hierarchies *within* queer communities, I sought to read about and understand activism that was maybe only just beginning to contend with these large state shifts. I wonder how this historicization, or looking back, might contribute to a generative understanding and critical engagement with contemporary queer politics, and help to articulate a push against increasing modes of institutionalization that refortify systems of domination and exclusion along lines of race, gender, and class. I wonder, too, how a push to historicize modes of activism and bring them into conversation with the present might forge and vitalize important, cross-generational connections among queer activists, scholars, and people alike; building spaces where the sharing of stories, ideas, and experiences that span decades is commonplace rather than rare. This seems to me an urgent and important goal of critical historical work in the field of education.

## Chapter Two

Foregrounding the background:

A critical pedagogical approach to archival photographs

Nicholas J. Whitney

Deirdre I. Judge

### **Introduction: Haunting steps**

“... when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what's been in your blind spot comes into view”

(Gordon, 2008, p. xvi)

Initially, I set out to explore the effect of queer disruption at universities in the photograph discussed throughout this paper, but ultimately that photograph had other plans for me.<sup>10</sup> In early November 2017, I gave a conference presentation about one photograph in the 1981 Tufts University yearbook: the group portrait of the Tufts Gay Community (TGC), the first university-recognized queer group on campus (fig.1). In the photograph, the group is assembled on the Memorial Steps, a large granite passageway up to and down from the Academic Quad. All thirteen faces are concealed by paper bags; one is holding an American flag, and two are holding what look to be cats. It's an eerie, deeply thought-provoking photograph in the way it visualizes

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<sup>10</sup> Whenever first person singular pronouns are used in this paper, it is referring to N. Whitney, the first author.

institutional neglect and repression—the impossibility of being known or seen—but also the community-building tactics of queers in spite of structural violence.

Ahead of the presentation, I had the idea to take a photograph of myself, sitting in the same location on the Memorial Steps. I thought it would be a compelling final slide of my

PowerPoint; a way of confronting present-day conditions at the university, and a gesture to my own subjective position within the research. Sitting there, posing for the photograph, feeling awkward for asking a stranger to capture this: it was one of the first times I realized what the Memorial Steps actually were. A war memorial, a commemoration of conquest, battle, nationhood. Right in front of me, words I had never read before, engraved in a circle: *In commemoration of those men of Tufts who in the war between the States helped preserve the Union. Civil War 1861-1865.* It was a happenstance moment of spatial recognition and

attention, when the past made contact with the granite on which I sat—or the past *was* the granite, engraved; or the present, me, was contacting the past. Time got jumbled. Whatever it was, I felt suddenly aware of what the Memorial Steps were, and what they did. I thought, for the first time since beginning that archival project, that these steps, too, were a sort-of archive. I began to notice, with unsettling and affective force, the ways particular national pasts get memorialized and spatialized within university spaces, and how masculinist state projects of nation-building become integrated into and in fact bolster ostensibly autonomous private

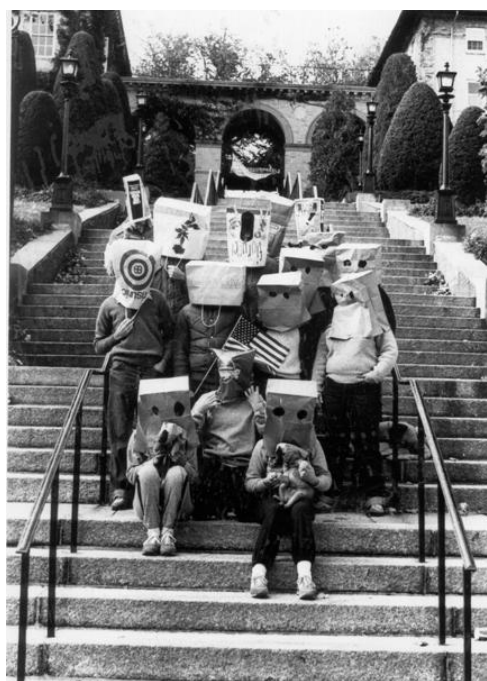


Fig. 1. Thomas, N. (1980). “Members of Tufts Gay Community (TGC). Tufts University. Digital Collections and Archives Medford MA

institutions (Brown, 1992; James, 1996). Six years of attending Tufts, and I had never really reckoned with these steps: *Why? How?*

In this formative experience, the background—of the 1981 yearbook photograph, as well as the actual, spatial and historical context—was making itself known to me, provoking incipient understandings of the multiple, overlapping histories of power spatialized on the Memorial Steps. This paper reckons with that haphazard journey to realization. In its most essential form, this paper is about the dynamic, often roundabout expedition that led us to theorizing how this yearbook photograph opens up the pedagogical possibility for exploring and considering power in specific institutional contexts, *if only we tune in a little more to the background*. As a process of excavating these concealed and embedded features of power in likely and unlikely places, we propose a new pedagogical methodology: *foregrounding the background*.

First, we will explain the archival study that motivated this paper. It is out of a particular institutional context—university archives—that this methodology and project was formed. Then, we will situate archival photographs, and more particularly university archival photographs, as a pedagogic tool within larger theoretical traditions of critical pedagogy (Freire, 2000; hooks, 1994; McLaren, 2009; Vaught & Hernández, 2013; Kincheloe, 2008). Building on these frameworks, we introduce a methodology of our own: *foregrounding the background*.

*Foregrounding the background* is a critical pedagogical approach to working with archival photographs that takes into account the historical, spatial, and affective elements of uncovering concealed histories of power within them, particularly by focusing on background spatial contexts. Finally, we conclude our paper by offering potential questions, critical lines of inquiry, and spaces for pedagogical exploration of *foregrounding the background* through one archival photograph we worked with during our research: the 1981 Tufts yearbook photograph described

above. Ultimately, in our methodological development and application to one image, we generate critical pedagogical questions with the intention of calling attention to, questioning, unsettling, and rupturing the normalization of space and power within specific institutional contexts.

### **Archival sites; university spaces**

This methodological paper was formulated out of Whitney's multi-site archival study conducted over one year at three different university repositories: Tufts University, Yale University, and Smith College. University archives are physical locations within universities which house, document, and preserve the material histories of their respective institutions. University archives contain a plethora of institutional documents available for study: office records, intracampus correspondences, student newspapers, student and faculty scholarship, yearbooks, ephemera, personal journals, memos, posters, art, photographs, private student collections, and more.

This methodology was developed out of a critical approach to archives as subjects (Stoler, 2002a; Foucault, 1972; Derrida, 1995; Carden & Vaught, 2016). Stoler (2002a) writes that archives are sites of knowledge production (see also Carden & Vaught, 2016). That is, archives do not simply "record" histories, statically, but take part in actively and subjectively producing them, legitimating them, and containing sites of rupture and possibility. Because of their vast holdings and official status via the institution, university archives offer a deep and powerful source of historical knowledge about the institutions they serve; and while they legitimate their institutions through collection and "empirical" documentation, they simultaneously provide unique and often under-explored possibilities for radical thought and action (Vincent & Mayer, 2007; Eichhorn, 2013).

The photograph discussed in this paper originated in its university's yearbook. Yearbooks, we have remarked, are a bit of a dying art; but for much of the twentieth century, yearbooks were a robust, well-documented source of rich, highly contextual, subjective institutional knowledge (see Panayotidis & Stortz, 2010). In all of the university archives here, yearbooks line the shelves of the reading room spaces; from our experience, they are quickly and easily accessible, often dense in information, and a go-to source of curated contextual knowledge for research into specific events, eras, or years at a particular university, and what was deemed worthy of preservation. Although we do not engage yearbooks themselves in this paper or methodology, we recognize their key role in providing and recording vital contextual information about the institutions we study through these photographs.

### **Theoretical frameworks**

“We should ... wonder what the image does not show within its frame yet nonetheless contain[s]” (Tavares, 2016, p. 40).

Recall the opening tableau of this paper: me, sitting on the Memorial Steps at Tufts University, posing for a photograph. In that instance, in the space between me and the photographer, between me and the Memorial Steps, my eye caught the granite engravings that I had yet overlooked. Cloaked in routine usage; but there, undeniably so. Then came an emergent—yet still unformed and inconclusive—inquiry into how the valorization of US projects of war, conquest, nation-building, and imperialism get normalized and concretized in and through the university—the types of dominant memory work Coloma (2012) calls “history with a capital H” (p. 235). This was a reckoning, a realization, a question, a feeling: that which was hidden in the frame of the 1981 photograph was making itself known with unsettling force (Gordon, 2008). This photograph contained much more than what was neatly visible or

seeable—hidden in background, but there. *What does the image not show, but nonetheless contain* (Tavares, 2016)? In *Pedagogies of the Image*, Hannah M. Tavares asks this of a very specific photograph to encourage working through the powered discursive formations that produce the conditions of colonization and forced assimilation of Hawaiian women and their bodies. To do so, Tavares (2016) looks for, and foregrounds, what she calls “refractions” in the image: the discourse that is “gathered” in the frame; hidden yet concealed (p. 40). Like Tavares, in this paper we wonder about the material histories and violent markings of power contained within archival photographs, often concealed in the background.

To understand archival photographs as harboring pedagogic potential and producing contexts and possibilities of knowledge production, we first enter into a broader tradition of critical pedagogy (Allen, 2004; Britzman, 1995, 2012; hooks, 1994; Carden & Vaught, 2016; Freire, 2000; Greene, 2009; Kincheloe, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Leonardo, 2002; McLaren, 2009; Coloma, 2012). There are many and multiple strands of critical pedagogical thought, from critical queer (Britzman, 1995, 2012; Kumashiro, 2002; McCready, 2010) to critical feminist (hooks, 1994; Fine, 2012) to critical race (Vaught & Hernández, 2013; Smith-Maddox & Solorzano, 2002), as well as the interaction between and among these traditions, and many more. At the core of all of these strands, though, is an exploration of how systems of power and domination work, and structure uneven social and material relations along lines of race, gender, class, and sexuality, to name a few. Moreover, critical pedagogy explores how power, and the hierarchies and forms of subjugation it sustains, is normalized in a variety of institutional and educational contexts, and inquires how those systems and relations of power might be named and explored through dialogic knowledge production and exchange (McLaren, 2009; Vaught & Hernández, 2013). By dialogic, we mean the continuous, open-ended, and dialectic form of



question-posing that attends to, but refuses find simple answers to, questions of power (Freire, 2000; Vaught & Hernández, 2013). Ultimately, a critical pedagogical framework urges that we think through and engage the conditions of power that organize social and political life, so that we may open up opportunities for inquiry, learning, teaching, and deep engagement with the world around us to open up new possibility. To this point, we are influenced directly by Kevin Kumashiro (2002), who argues that critical education “involves learning something that disrupts our commonsense view of the world” (p. 63). In this paper, we wonder how archival images might help us visualize and disrupt commonsense views of space, context, knowledge, and learning.

There are a multitude of contexts in which a critical pedagogical framework has been taken up or explored, including in “traditional” classroom settings (hooks, 1994; Vaught & Hernández, 2013), in teacher-prep programs (Smith-Maddox & Solorzano, 2002), in prison classrooms (Vaught & Judge, unpublished), as well as in non-classroom educational contexts (Tavares, 2016; Giroux, 2004). In this paper, we begin not with the context, but instead with the pedagogic tool: archival photographs. Indeed, here, we begin with the pedagogic potential of archival photographs as one salient way that we may engage questions of power, and then think about how these questions have wide implications in a variety of learning contexts or spaces of education. In her work with archival images, Tavares (2016) wields this potentiality and explores in rich detail how photographs open up sites and contexts of pedagogy and knowledge. She does so by unfixing the presumed “stillness” of photographs; and explores, with methodological rigor, their movements, their complex institutional locations, their roots of origin, and their potential for disruption.

It is Tavares' (2016) resonant call that returns here, pulsating, like the refrain of a catchy song: *What does the image not show, yet nonetheless contain?* It is this specific invitation, or methodological challenge, that led us to wondering how we might develop and elucidate specific reading and knowledge practices that attend to that which is contained in the *background* of an image, yet is seemingly unshown. Thus, we take up Tavares' question, and develop our own: What does the *background* of the image not show, but nonetheless contain? That fateful moment on the Memorial Steps presented a unique way to attend to this methodological rumination: it demanded an optic switch, a way of pulling the background forward, centering it. How, once we identify the background, the context, the deep scape of a particular image, might we engage in a process of critical knowledge production and exchange? How can positioning these questions within critical pedagogical traditions foster a dialogic approach to knowledge exchange? What sorts of questions and lines of inquiry might we pose to articulate the material histories or looming secrets contained in an image? These sorts of questions get to the core of our developing critical pedagogical approach, which we discuss below.

### **Critical pedagogical methodology:**

#### ***Foregrounding the background***

In order to explore archival photographs for critical pedagogical potential, we develop one methodological practice called *foregrounding the background*. Through *foregrounding the background*, we interrogate and center background space in archival photographs. For instance: What would happen if we were to center or pull forward the Memorial Steps in that 1981 yearbook photograph? What if we were to treat it and its ideological functions as the foregrounded, critical subject that the members of the Tufts Gay Community were interacting with? What new methods of reading or realizations about space might we produce in that optic

switch? As a methodological practice, *foregrounding the background* charges us to ask critical questions like these of images and space, in order to uncover the ways power always haunt the frame, even if camouflaged or seemingly hidden.

Rather than looking for a singular detail, signal, or shadow (Barthes, 1981; Gordon, 2008), our approach takes the background as the holistic site of critical visual study and exploration. Importantly, *foregrounding the background* does not ignore the presupposed foreground of an archival image. The line between background and foreground is uncharted and unclear; and, moreover, there would be no background without what we register as the foreground, and vice versa. Rather, *foregrounding the background* recognizes the particular allure and political importance of certain photographs (i.e., the inciting reality of 13 queer students with bags over their heads in 1980), yet brings the background forward and centers it as the critical subject to engage lines of inquiry in a dialectic (McLaren, 2009) with the typically presumed subjects. Treating the background as subject—pulling it close and posing difficult, critical questions of it—unleashes the possibility of new ways of seeing both the photograph, as well as the lived space in and beyond its frame. Once the background is explored, questioned, unsettled, materialized, then the *entire photograph* might be placed and read in a larger, deeper critical and historical context—where the background space is made known, and inextricable from an understanding of the image as a whole.

Finally, *foregrounding the background* is a critical pedagogical methodology. Essentially, this means that we pose lines of inquiry and offer ways of reading archival photographs that attend to the production and disruption of power in educational contexts, broadly understood. *Foregrounding the background* is, itself, a methodology of knowledge production, as well as it presents opportunities for students and scholars alike to look for ways and contexts in which this

knowledge might be exchanged and cultivated. We offer no concrete conclusions about where and when this methodology might be taken up. This might certainly occur as an activity or project in a “traditional” classroom space, but the sets of questions it poses are generative, rather than restrictive, and might be taken up in a wide variety of knowledge spaces. Later in this paper, we propose some such possibilities of context using a specific image. In the subsections below, we explore some major constitutive parts we have come to understand as central to *foregrounding the background* as a critical pedagogical approach to photos: question-posing and critical dialectic, context and specificity of power, and dialogic collaboration. We conclude this section by posing a set of questions that form the loose but capacious approach to our methodology.

### **Question-posing & critical dialectic**

“‘The question, I realized, is more important than finding an exact answer,’ remarked one student. And the original questions are not old or resolved, but always in need of restating. It is the restatement that supports resistance, disruption, and challenge”

(Vaught & Hernández, 2013, p. 382).

First and foremost, *foregrounding the background* is a way of producing knowledge through question-posing, a central pillar of critical pedagogy (Freire, 2000; McLaren, 2009; Vaught & Hernández, 2013). In this tradition, to engage and interrogate systems of power is an open-ended, untidy, dialogic process. As a practice of critical knowledge production and exchange, the lines of inquiry inspired through *foregrounding the background* refuse tidy answers—conclusive packages, wrapped in neat bows. Rather, it is a deeply engaged process that inspires specific, iterative, and generative questions about power, ones that deeply consider the

complex formations and movements of power in specific institutional context (see Foucault, 1995 in Vaught & Hernández, 2013, p. 368).

Thus, the questions formed through *foregrounding the background* should be dialectic in their formation. By dialectic questions, we mean the process of “open and questioning form of thinking which demands reflection back and forth between elements” (Carr & Kemmis, 1983 in McLaren, 2009, p.61). In a critical pedagogical tradition, this means situating power and inequity in dynamic structural context, recognizing the “problems of society as more than simply isolated events,” but as interactive between part and whole, the local and the structural (McLaren, 2009, p. 61). McLaren (2009) suggests that this dialectic movement between parts helps students and learners explore the foundations of power in many societal forms.

In *foregrounding the background*, we pose dialectic questions of archival images to place our questions and lines of inquiry in deep, structural context; moving back and forth between elements of an archival image to do so, but always centering the background. For instance, we might ask how the background of a photograph is made intelligible through its relation to the foreground and outward to the entire image. We might also ask where the archival image was found or located (university archives? A community-built archive? A family photo album? Online?), and how the location of retrieval influences how we make sense of the particular photo. Or, we might ask how the background of the photograph has a place in a larger, lived context and what that context means or does to a reading of the photograph. Finally, we might ask how, if we have had experience in the particular background an image captures, we can situate ourselves within that dialectic relation. All questions here attend to part and whole, their dynamic relationship and interplay, and the ways this interplay is instructive of naming and understanding power in specific context.

## **Context & specificity of power**

As a critical pedagogical methodology, *foregrounding the background* recognizes and explores how power and oppression are structural and systemic, yet also always contextual and specific (Freire 1985, 2000; Vaught & Hernández, 2013; McLaren, 2009). Some of the dialectic questions suggested above already attend to this question. Of context, Freire (1985) implores, “it is impossible to read texts without reading the context of the text, without establishing the relationships between the discourse and the reality which shapes the discourse” (p. 18-19). By this, Freire means that a text (or image, or subject of knowledge) is formed by a complex set of social, political, spatial, temporal, institutional, and geographic circumstances, as well as it is made intelligible within the specific location that it is read. For instance, in many schools, Freire (2000) notes, the reading of a text is shaped by dominant discourses and epistemological practices of that school, by the top-down transference of knowledge to students characteristic of banking pedagogy. Context shapes a text and our engagement with it, and contexts are shaped by power. Through our methodology, we consider: What is the temporal, historical, spatial context of the background in the photograph? Where and when was it taken? What are the marked and unmarked political and social conditions contained in and surrounding it? Where did that image come from; where did we find it? And, self-reflexively, how might the context within which we reside have an effect on how we look at or understand an image? Sometimes, as is the case in this paper, those contexts converge and are synonymous; sometimes they are not. Nevertheless, naming and attending to context allows specific questions of culture, history, temporality, and geography to be better understood.

To this point, context must be understood alongside specificity. Or, engaging and elucidating context means exploring power in its specificity (Moraga, 1983; Vaught &

Hernández, 2013). Moraga (1983) contends that elucidating the specificities of oppression, rather than ranking them, allows a fuller and deeper understanding of how different oppressions work differently, and how they expose various features of structural domination. Working from Moraga's prescient point in order to construct a post-racial critical race praxis, Vaught & Hernández (2013) warn that *failing* to identify specificity may "[entrench] reigning ideological definitions of race as decoupled from real material, political, and cultural power" (p. 370), especially in a national context defined through post-racialism. Vaught & Hernández (2013) explore specificity in their pedagogical context by explaining how racial identification operates differently across institutional contexts, material histories, and educational spaces, and suggest the same of gender, sexuality, class, nationality, and so on. They urge us, in short, to consider how power is attached to the institutional arrangements of a particular context; how people are differently powered in certain contexts, and how this is all instructive of a structurally and materially supremacist context in the US, where relations of power, although complex, are endemic.

Together, context and specificity inform each other to produce sharper analytic engagements with power and oppression within a particular setting. In *foregrounding the background*, we might ask how that setting or context is visualized by the background of the image. And, in relation to this, we might consider how that background plays into how subjects in photograph (if there are any) are read, understood, and conceptualized in powered context. Furthermore, we might ask how the context in which we shape our questions affects the types of readings and analyses we produce.

### **Collaboration & meta-process**

“I engage in dialogue because I recognize the social and not merely the individualistic character of the process of knowing. In this sense, dialogue presents itself as an indispensable component of the process of both learning and knowing” (Freire & Macedo, 1995, p. 379).

As a critical pedagogical methodology, *foregrounding the background* encourages collaboration and the building of knowledge communities through dialogue (see Freire, 2000; Carden & Vaught, 2016; Freire & Macedo, 1995; Smith-Maddox & Solórzano, 2002; Vaught & Judge, unpublished; Britzman, 2012). Collaboration and dialogic practice are about a collective uncovering of power, building a shared and social vocabulary, and producing generative sets of questions and analytic backgrounds among people and communities of people. This is what makes *foregrounding the background* a pedagogical venture, rather than simply a framework for critical analysis: through dialogic collaboration about archival images, we produce deep, critical knowledge and questions between and among us, and in relation to the images themselves. In their work combining Critical Race theory with a Freirean tradition of “problem-posing,” Smith-Maddox & Solórzano (2002) suggest that a dialogic process is a central tool to identify and name power by co-constructing knowledge with others; and through this co-construction, political community is built and strengthened. In this methodology, engaging analyses and questions of power with others allows deeper questions to be formed, more complex questions to be posed, and a sharper ability to identify and name power across experience and difference (Britzman, 2012). Indeed, Britzman (2012) charges, building knowledge with attention to and across difference forms political community; this is central to the practice of knowledge production. These understandings, grounded in critical pedagogy, are embedded in the way we imagine *foregrounding the background* as educational praxis.



Collaboration and dialogue also allows an exploration of meta-processual questions. Meta-process is, put simply, discussing the process itself. We understand meta-process to be instructive of the journey of knowledge production itself, of the journey of learning.

*Foregrounding the background* came to existence, in fact, through engaging our process alongside our analyses of an archival image. For instance, we often discussed why and with what methods we were producing certain analyses or coming to certain observations. Discussing the process of knowledge production itself helped ground both of us in more specific analytic backgrounds and methods, and forged deeper understandings of each other's scholarly and pedagogical interests.

### **Questions to ask**

In this section, we pose sets of question that form a capacious foundation to *foregrounding the background* and might be applied to an inquiry of the archival photograph. The questions posed below are an offering. They beckon to questions we may ask about archival images and how we might go about asking them, but they are meant to be anything but restrictive.

#### *Spatial questions.*

*What is the space?* What is the larger context in which the space exists? What does that space look like; what are its material and aesthetic properties? When and where and why was that space built or conceived or assembled in the way it appears in the photograph? Is the space, now, different than it is in the photograph; was it different before the photograph was taken? Or, what are the histories of that space? What are the legacies of property, ownership, theft, or dispossession that haunt that space?

#### *Function questions.*

*What is the presumed or assumed use of that space?* How does the use of that space effect the meaning of the space? What are the ways or effects of its existence in the photograph? Who can and cannot use the space as a matter of ability, geography, political or social access? If there are subjects in the photograph, how is the space of the background central to an understanding of those subjects (rather than: how are subjects interacting with the background)?

*Questions about meaning/symbolism.*

*What does the space mean, and who is producing that meaning?* What is the epistemological groundwork of that space? What is embedded in the aesthetic construction of that space? How can spatial features be read as representational of the power that courses through a particular context?

*Affective/experiential questions.*

*What feelings are produced in interaction with the photograph and/or the background space?* What feelings are not produced, but perhaps are invited/supposed to be produced? What feelings are disallowed by institutional, ideological forces? How are our affective reactions instructive and important to the process of knowledge production? What emotions invite pause/interest?

### ***Foregrounding the background in application***

In this section, we use our own process and project as a case study to demonstrate *foregrounding the background* in application. We do so by first narrating the conversations that initially led us to thinking about the background of the 1981 Tufts University yearbook photograph. Through briefly detailing our process below, we showcase the untidy, generative, question-posing process that has come to define *foregrounding the background*. While this narrative might seem linear and streamlined, we want to stress that our process was anything but;

in fact, it was always iterative, consistently looping back to our original questions and witnessing how those were taking shape, changing, or deepening as we moved along. Through detailing our own growing experience with the methodology, we hope to open up pedagogical possibility and potential to engage with archival photographs across learning contexts.

### **Faceless queers: A developing narrative of *foregrounding the background***

To begin the project that ultimately became this methodology, I went searching for historical photographs of queer student groups in university archives. In a meeting one day, a brilliant archivist at Tufts presented me with the image that I would come to research and study over the course of a year: a photograph that was taken in 1980, but was published in the 1981 Tufts yearbook. It was the black-and-white image of the Tufts Gay Community, paper bags over their heads, sitting on the Memorial Steps at Tufts. The photograph was eerie, shocking—exciting, too, in the multiple analytic possibilities it provoked. I left the Tufts archives with a digital copy of the photograph, my mind whirring about where this project would go.

To engage the photograph, I began alone with questions about queer disruption, vaguely defined and somewhat preordained. It seemed subversively humorous to me, for example, that this queer group was holding an American flag, especially at the time of its capture, when queer people were hardly incorporated into the legal fold of American citizenship or nationality (Richardson, 2012; Berlant, 1997; Coloma, 2012). I asked: How is the group mocking the yearbook form (through the paper bags; a refusal to be recognized or seen), and how does that disruption also speak to the *inability* to be seen or recognized? How can we place the photograph in a broader history of repression at Tufts? What can we make of the American flag in the center?

When I brought this photograph to Judge, who became my dialogue and writing partner for this project, she asked a different set of questions about it. Judge, who was training in feminist ethnography at the time, elicited questions of the image that were more in tune with its context and space. She wondered about the structural history of the Memorial Steps, especially after I relayed my experience taking a photo on the Memorial on them: How do people routinely engage the Steps? What do the Steps do as a war memorial, ideologically and symbolically? How might that effect be somewhat concealed through their routine usage as a campus passageway? In light of these questions, Judge wondered what the queer group's positioning on the Steps meant. While I was reading the photograph as intentional disruption somewhat removed of context, Judge suggested that we engage that context as irremovable from a reading of the photograph itself. She asked how the Memorial Steps, as a specific structural site, might converse with the queer group already in the photo; how this mammoth institutional structure and passageway at Tufts bore untapped meaning in our reading. After our initial dialogue, we began to ask more pointed questions of the photo's background. We shifted our analytic focus. Already, our varied sets of analytic questions produced different ways of attending to the image, ones more in tune to context.

We started meeting regularly to discuss the photo in critical dialogue. Often, our meetings hosted conversations where we vehemently disagreed over the photo, sometimes leaving with more questions but sometimes leaving more entrenched in our original readings.

Notes from an early meeting demonstrate this tension:

***Planning convo 2/2:***

- *DJ most interested in incidents that are; I'm [NW] interested in moments of rupture (and re-normalization??)*

- *What these sites do, sites of memory* (Personal meeting notes, 2/2/18)

These meeting notes document the divergent frameworks with which we originally attended to the photograph. I was interested in disruption as a decisive feature of the image; Judge was much more interested in the structural and institutional context of its capture. From budding interests, we posed increasingly more specific questions. Indeed, throughout that same meeting, we continued to discuss these opening questions with the (perhaps misguided) intent of reconciling our divergent research interests into one tangible, streamlined piece or project. We engaged in conversation across our different interpretations; arguing, generatively, about the intent of the queer group and whether that mattered; the yearbook and its purpose as a preservation of institutional memory; the Memorial Steps as a war memorial and what that might suggest about the queer group holding an American flag; the normalization of the war memorial as a campus stairway; our own experiences traversing the campus. These different questions inspired rigorous dialogue and helped us move in between elements of the photo, its background, and its larger context. We left the meeting with sharpened, yet still developing and always unfinished, lines of inquiry.

This meeting was essential to discovering the intent and importance of our dialogic process. We found that, while we were hoping to converge on a neat set of points to produce a streamlined critical analysis, that this was not as important as the process of question-asking and inquiry that we were beginning to develop. After our meeting, we documented in our shared notes:

***Argument/questions:***

- *How do queer archival artifacts disrupt, speak to, counteract, possibly reproduce, the power and hegemony of “national memory”?*

- *What do dominant sites of war memorialization “do” -- why do queers intervene and to what effect*
- *Specifically how does this occur within private elite educational institutions*
- *Institutional family / queer family*
- *DJ: Normalization of war memorial spaces as “unnoticeable” institutional feature, hiding in plain sight, but also very visible. “Disgusting” space. Process of normalizing those spaces.*
- *NW in conversation with Halberstam<sup>11</sup>: Be suspect of memorialization--- how is this embedded? How have queers been suspect? -- giving the middle finger to these spaces (Personal meeting notes, 2/2/18)*

Through these questions we began to hone in on specificity and context. These questions show how we shifted to thinking about the background of the photograph primarily, yet still anchored in our own scholarly interests. Considering the effect of war memorials broadly led us to wonder what it meant for a war memorial to exist, seemingly as a mundane structure, in a private, elite university like Tufts University. We even began to locate these questions not just in dialogue with each other, but also within other people’s work, like Jack Halberstam’s, cited in our notes above. Here, we began to recognize that collaboration extended beyond just the two of us, and began to engage scholars’ work across disciplines. This opened up new lines of questioning and both sharpened and challenged our nascent analyses.

Again and again, our sets of questions returned to what it *meant* that a war memorial doubled as a stairway; what that did, in effect, to assume a shared national memory or community in the very groundwork of Tufts’ campus. We wondered, how did this

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<sup>11</sup> Halberstam, J. (2011). *The queer art of failure*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

functionality—in comparison to a standalone structure or statue—change the texture and analysis of the memorial? Of the photo? To do this, we needed to ask: When and why were they built?

Following this, we conducted some brief historical research into the Steps to better situate our questions in context. We learned that the Steps were built at Tufts University in 1929, and were, in fact, constructed within a larger, national architectural project that sought to recuperate national unity after first World War (Ferguson, 2016; Trout, 2010). Winter (2001) describes this recuperation as a “memory boom,” a particular wave of remembrance and nationalism that occurred specifically after the first World War. Out of this memory boom came a novel design for memorials: functional or living memorials (Trout, 2010). Not without its critics on multiple political sides, the idea of functional memorials is to dually construct utilitarian sites as memorial spaces. In other words, routine space—like stairways or plazas or lobbies—was being actively constructed by and through national remembrance; and, vice versa, national remembrance was becoming a thing of routine structure. The Memorial Steps were erected through this twin motive as a functional memorial: both a site of a national memory from the Civil War to World War I, and as an entryway into the Tufts campus from College Avenue in Medford. This historical context helped confirm a reading of the Steps as purposefully mundane or routine, as well as they helped us situate our inquiries within a broader national, political, and historical context. Important here is not that this historical context helped us “answer” questions, but rather articulated specificity for further inquiry.

Through their function as a campus passageway, we wondered how the Memorial Steps were constructed as a *presumed* need of the private, university community, or the ways in which might read it as such. We considered the ways the embeddedness of the Steps might ideologically enmesh universities within larger national projects. Quite frankly, we wondered

what the Steps' memorialization (“*In commemoration of those men of Tufts who in the war between the States helped preserve the Union*”) was even *doing* on a university campus, what its requisite yet routine presence signaled. We also wondered why so many other college campuses had memorials, too—what this suggested, and if we could find other photos like this one.

Then, we thought through these questions in relation to the specific 1981 photograph: that image of thirteen students known as the Tufts Gay Community, paper bags over their heads, holding an American flag in the center. Or, we returned, iteratively, to where we began: not to settle or resolve our disputes, but to engage them more critically in the context of all the questions we had posed of the background. As we wrote this paper, we kept toying analytically with two main lines of inquiries. We end this section by posing questions along these lines, even as they continue to develop long past this writing.

1. **Mundanity & the messiness of intent(??).** One of our main arguments that catalyzed our dialogue together was about intent. We both agreed that, normally, we don't much care about speculating or theorizing “intent” of an image or text. In the long run, intent hardly matters in our analysis. Yet, here, it actually became an interesting question. That the Steps are a routine, mundane passageway on the Tufts campus, and that they were constructed purposefully so, complicated all of our analyses, all of our questions. We realized that our very inability to understand or even neatly speculate the intentions of TGC was itself constructed by how mundane the Steps are constructed to be. How could we know whether sitting on the Steps was a political choice or an opportune site? We then asked: What does it mean to be unable to know whether or not they were intentionally



disrupting a space? What does that tell us about the space and its larger context?  
About the university and its sanctioning of war memorials, writ large?

**2. National kinship; queer kinship.** Following all of our inquiries of the Memorial Steps, we engaged the possible connection between national memory and normative kinship forms, using critical work from queer cultural studies to sharpen those analyses (Berlant, 1997; Halberstam, 2005, 2011). We posed these questions explicitly in relation to the queer group photographed, and what sort of kinship relation they were suggesting in the image. We wondered how our developing questions about dominant national memory embedded in U.S. war memorials conversed with Berlant's (1997) suggestion that the heterofamilial kinship form is the "logic of the national future" (p. 18). Then, how might we read these features (war memorials, national memory, and heterofamilial kinship) as a triangulation, as a particular narrative formation of power, visualized in the 1981 image? How might this photograph be read as a subversion of this form, in its refusal of identification (through the paper-bags)? But also: How might this group's position within a private, elite institution, although tenuous, complicate uniform or overly simplistic readings of power and oppression? How is their refusal of identification *yet* acknowledgement within the 1981 yearbook suggestive of the institutional complexity of power rather than a simple binary of inclusion and exclusion? Or, how might the photo open up pedagogic space to think through contradiction?

Our inquiries above chart an incipient path of possibility, where the archival photograph with which we began is no longer static—frozen in time or place or point of origin—but rather

belongs to a particular spatial context and temporal location, and travels dynamically alongside our pedagogical process. As we pose more questions, we produce new meanings. Our questions have led us, like Coloma (2012), to “foreground an interrogation of sexuality in order to unpack the underlying patriarchal heteronormative culture and economy that support the concepts and practices of nation, nationalism, and imperialism” (p. 237). In other words, we have put “queer to work” (Coloma, 2012) in order to question and unsettle, and most importantly imagine possibility of knowledge production and exchange. Our work together has opened a space of contradiction, whereby this photograph does not simply represent a singular thing or reading, but might be located within deeper sets of questions and contradictions (Berlant, 1997). Even as we write this, we continue discussing this photograph, and we imagine other contexts where we might open up this dialogue—some of which are discussed in the following section.

Above, we have presented just one narrative example of our development and exercise of *foregrounding the background* with one archival image. In this narrative, we have shown the fundamental process of dialogue and question-posing that has come to inform our critical pedagogical approach to this methodology. Through collaborative dialogue, we asked questions of each other and of space, following lines of inquiry related to the contours of our differing interests. Our areas of inquiry were related to our overlapping and diverging subjectivities and scholarly training, and they allowed for rigorous engagement with each other that did not always result in accord, yet almost always led to deeper questions and critical lines of inquiry. As we moved further in the process, we incorporated more theory into our questions, which both sharpened and complicated our own thinking. Since this photograph is within the spatial realm of our daily work, we have both noted and continuously offer new readings and analyses that form new questions. Ultimately, our ongoing process demonstrates how archival photographs, as

Tavares (2016)'s work has instructed us since the inception of this project, contain more than they immediately show; that they are rife with pedagogical and dialogic possibility, and have profound implications for a variety of educational and learning contexts, including our own.

### **Conclusion & Possibilities**

In this paper, we have engaged critical pedagogical practices to approach archival photographs in distinct ways. Particularly, we explored what an optic switch might do to forge a deeper understanding of an archival image, and how that optic switch might be engaged as a project of pedagogy and knowledge production. We have called this methodological practice *foregrounding the background*. It is the task of *foregrounding the background* to unload the meaning embroiled in background space: to consider it in its complexity, and to produce generative knowledge in doing so. Here, we have done so through undertaking multiple principles of critical pedagogy, including question-posing, forging critical dialogues, and attending to the context and specificity of power.

This paper is a scholarly opening and a pedagogical challenge: What other ways and in what other contexts might we explore *foregrounding the background*? What new sets of questions might we be able to develop and practice? What questions that were not posed here might be considered? Here, we present without an air of finality; rather, we open up to critique, question, and engagement.

#### **Pedagogical contexts: An invitation**

The work of this paper is not to prescribe a context or unit plan for this methodology, but to invite possibility for pedagogic engagement that ranges context and form. This methodology is capacious—it invites possibility, development, and question. Furthermore, we have explored this methodology with a very specific image: one from a university archive. Yet, we imagine this

methodology taken up with a wide range of archival images, broadly conceived: What of an image in a family or personal photo album? How and with whom might *foregrounding the background* being used there? What of photographs with unknown or unclear backgrounds? How might we engage in images like this differently; how can we shift our sets of questions? Or, what about photographs that are famous or iconic for their *foregrounds*? How might this methodological approach be an interesting and nuanced way of attending to the conditions surrounding such an image? Moreover, we invite thinking unconventionally about educational or learning context; to invite the potentiality for knowledge production in places where it is not traditionally seen as existing. Nevertheless, we are excited about the possibility of application that this methodology engenders, and below propose a few ways we might see this happening:

- **Written or spoken dialogues.** Much of the writing and scholarship in this paper was inspired by our participation in an incredible seminar in our graduate program called Pedagogies. In that course, we were paired off into dialogue partners, where we engaged in rigorous, regular, written dialogue about readings and an educational praxis site throughout the class session (see Vaught & Hernández, 2013). Motivated by this generative experience, we open up to other contexts where rigorous dialogue might be key to this methodology. We imagine exponential possibilities for engaging one photograph in pairs over the course of a fixed time period. For example, what about corresponding through letters, with distance between the people in dialogue?
- **A community discussion/history project.** This pedagogy might provide generative conversation within existing communities, both formal and not. A community center, religious space, school, coffee shop, library, neighborhood (among others), for example, might host a community talk that engages discussion around an image situated in their

geospatial context, creating dialogue around people's contemporary and historical experiences in relation to the image. Together, the community could build a collective history of the space and read it in relation to the image. This might provide a unique opportunity to engage in intergenerational experiences of that space, as well as unmask power in sites of daily traversal.

These are two loosely formed ideas that are full of potential development. We wonder what other contexts people envision this methodology being useful, but we leave that question open for future engagement.

### **Afterimages**

“If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays...”

(Morrison, 1987, p. 43)

Long after this writing, the Memorial Steps will remain, in abiding granite, as a passageway up to the Tufts University campus. As the set of stairs that leads directly to Paige Hall, the building of our academic department, we both traverse these steps regularly. Before this project, we thought little if anything of the Memorial Steps. Now, we climb them all too knowingly. Complicit in our knowledge and regular traversal, we often share our realizations with each other, and with others, as a matter of discussion. Many people with whom we speak reply with wide-eye realization: they are familiar with the Memorial Steps, but they had never really considered their intent or effect.

Neither had we, before this project.

Our work with this photograph has left an afterimage, and this afterimage haunts the way we experience and understand these steps. The afterimage alters the way we walk through campus, conditioning us to see other ways the campus is carved out through histories and

legacies of power. It helps us imagine and articulate the forces of violence and power that continue into the present at Tufts. In so doing, they help us unsettle those forces. And, although we pose no “solutions” here, we realize the potential of this methodology as a step toward imagining otherwise.

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### Chapter One

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