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Sex, Art, and Moral Panic

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In 2015, Duke University selected a text for incoming students to read together: the *New York Times* bestselling graphic memoir, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006) by Alison Bechdel. The memoir recounts Bechdel's childhood and adolescence in rural Pennsylvania, including her relationship with an abusive, closeted father who eventually committed suicide and her own identification as a lesbian. By the time Duke freshmen were asked to read *Fun Home*, a musical adaptation had opened on Broadway after being named a finalist for the 2014 Pulitzer Prize in Drama.[1]

As future Blue Devils daydreamed about their first days of school, one student suggested on a college Facebook page that reading *Fun Home* would go against his Christian beliefs. Picked up in conservative and mainstream media, his comment sparked an ongoing discussion about the politics of college reading, pornography, censorship, and the rights of Christians. This student, and many others, objected to sexual material deemed immoral based on religious beliefs. In some discussions, it was not merely the sexual or queer content of Bechdel's memoir, but especially the *visual* depiction of masturbation and lesbian encounters that proved troubling. The Duke student expanded this argument in the *Washington Post*. "I think there is an important distinction between images and written words," he reasoned: "If the book explored the same themes without sexual images or erotic language, I would have read it. But viewing pictures of sexual acts, regardless of the genders of the people involved, conflict[s] with the inherent sacredness of sex. My beliefs extend to pop culture and even Renaissance art depicting sex."[2] These beliefs "come primarily from my understanding of the Bible," he continues, "which I have read multiple times, studied weekly in community for the last seven years, and consider to be the Word of God."[3]

I want to focus our attention not so much on this particular freshman but on the more common pattern of thought this response to *Fun Home* demonstrates. A similar debate had already broken in South Carolina when the College of Charleston selected *Fun Home* for its 2013–2014 program, College Reads! One opponent argued that Bechdel's memoir includes images that are "frankly, very pornographic."[4] Conservative backlash led the South Carolina House of Representatives to cut funding for the program.[5] Such worries about pornographic images—especially those

[1]Alexandra Samuels, "Duke University Freshmen Refuse to Read 'Fun Home' for Moral Reasons," *USA Today*, Aug. 24, 2015, https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2015/08/24/incoming-freshman-duke-university-fun-home-alison-bechdel/32290321/ (accessed Sept. 1, 2017).

[2]Brian Grasso, "I'm a Duke Freshman. Here's Why I Refused to Read 'Fun Home,'" *Washington Post*, Aug. 25, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/08/25/im-a-duke-freshman-heres-why-i-refused-to-read-fun-home/?utm_term=.3f7aa2d0173f (accessed Sept. 1, 2017).

[3]Grasso, "I'm a Duke Freshman."

[4]Oran Smith, cited in Jenna Lyons, "Two School's Budgets Altered Following Gay-Themed Assigned Reading Controversy," *USA Today College*, July 9, 2014, http://college.usatoday.com/2014/07/09/two-s-c-schools-budgets-altered-following-gay-themed-assigned-reading-controversy/ (accessed Sept. 1, 2017).

[5]Sarah McCammon, "Books with Gay Themes Put S.C. Colleges' Funding at Risk," *National Public Radio*, May 9, 2014, http://www.npr.org/2014/05/09/310726247/gay-friendly-book-selections-put-college-funding-at-risk (accessed Sept. 1, 2017). The vote also came in opposition to a similar program at USC Upstate that chose *Out Loud: The Best of Rainbow Radio*, which describes South Carolina's first lesbian and gay radio show.

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depicting same-sex sex—have a longer history among conservative Christians in the modern United States, dating back at least to the 1873 Comstock Law that criminalized all sorts of erotic and sexual content as obscenity. And an emphasis upon the visual field and its uniquely suggestive powers emerges from an even longer history of Western ocularcentrism. But it also winds through more specific moments in religious and political history, shaping how and what Americans see—which images come to seem pornographic or sacrilegious and which do not, which provoke panic and which impart comfort.

It is not strictly the images in *Fun Home* that evoke panic or resistance but instead a cultural habit of seeing, one forged through decades of politically and religiously conservative efforts to recontextualize feminist and queer art by reducing it to pornography—to dirty images threatening the moral fabric of the nation itself. Conservative culture warriors of the 1980s and 1990s regularly attacked feminist and queer art in this way, often using decontextualized examples to ramp up opposition to public funding for artists and to shape policy concerning what was considered obscene forms of speech.[6] Such efforts capitalized on converging moral panics over the HIV/AIDS crisis, the advance of the sexual revolution, and fears that Christians in the United States were under attack. They emerged in the form of what the historian Richard Hofstadter famously diagnosed as "the paranoid style in American politics."[7]

Note how Hofstadter pays as much attention to the "style" of this paranoid rhetoric as he does to its "political psychology." "Style has more to do with the way in which ideas are believed and advocated," he writes, "than with the truth or falsity of their content." It "evokes the sense of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy."[8] Hofstadter was writing out of the immediate shadows of the Goldwater campaign, but, as he shows, this paranoid style had numerous antecedents, including bouts of anti-Catholicism, the anti-Masonic movement, and the era of McCarthyism. His examples of the paranoid style have much in common with what the sociologist Stanley Cohen dubbed in the 1970s "moral panics"—episodes in which an exaggerated social threat, often fueled (if not largely concocted) by reporting in mass media, leads to social and political response, often in the form of marginalizing a scapegoat.[9]

The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have witnessed no abatement of this social phenomenon: Moral panics have erupted around immigration, crime, video games, rap music, pop music, drug use, pornography, Satanic ritual abuse, and homosexuality, including panic about the spread of AIDS since the 1980s.[10] Today we might add panics over contraception mandates, the specter of reverse discrimination, Muslim immigration, and threats to religious freedom. Social anxieties around race, gender, sexuality, class, and religion suffuse these episodes. The visual habits of moral panic surrounding feminist and queer imagery today are rooted in the paranoid style and moral anxieties of these earlier episodes. Let me offer the example of one artist whose work has sparked intense controversy.

David Wojnarowicz (1954–1992) emerged as one of the hottest artists of the 1980s East Village art scene. A noted writer, he also worked in photography, film, and mixed-media. During parts of his youth, Wojnarowicz lived on the streets of New York City and hustled to make money. He also took part in the city's burgeoning gay sexual culture. He learned in the late 1980s that he had contracted HIV and died from AIDS a few years later. Much of

[6]See Steven C. Dubin, *Arresting Images: Impolitic Art and Uncivil Actions* (New York, 1992).

[7]Hofstadter first discussed this "paranoid style" in a 1964 *Harper's* essay and then expanded upon it in the title essay of his now-canonical book. See Richard Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," *Harper's Magazine*, Nov. 1964, 77–86; and Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (1964; New York, 2008).

[8]Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," 77.

[9]Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (1972; New York, 2011).

[10]For instance, see Roger N. Lancaster, *Sex Panic and the Punitive State* (Berkeley, CA, 2011); Joseph Laycock, *Dangerous Games: What the Moral Panic over Role-Playing Games Says about Play, Religion, and Imagined Worlds* (Berkeley, CA, 2015); and Cindy Patton, *Sex and Germs: The Politics of AIDS* (Boston, 1985).

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his artistic work drew from human experiences of suffering, poverty, drug use, and sex, often juxtaposing various forms of visual symbols to create mythological stories.[11] In the late 1980s, Donald Wildmon, the founder of the conservative Christian group the American Family Association (AFA), republished images depicting sexual acts from Wojnarowicz's larger works in flyers mailed to fellow Christian conservatives as well as to every member of Congress. Through such mailings, he hoped to expose the pornographic or sacrilegious nature of work by artists like Wojnarowicz, Andres Serrano, Annie Sprinkle, and Robert Mapplethorpe and to undercut public funding for artistic work he deemed immoral.

Wojnarowicz had already ignited controversy by describing Cardinal John O'Connor of New York as a "fat cannibal from that house of walking swastikas up on fifth avenue."[12] The line came from the catalogue essay for *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, which featured New York City artists responding to the AIDS crisis. Conservative Christians, including Wildmon, attacked the National Endowment for the Arts for funding such work, even though the NEA did not actually fund the catalogue.[13] Wildmon's erroneous citation was a common tactic in AFA literature meant to incite moral and political indignation. Incensed by such misrepresentations, Wojnarowicz took Wildmon to court over his use of the artist's images in ways that selectively reproduced them as pornographic, detached from the broader political and symbolic meanings of the work from which they were cut. In finding for Wojnarowicz, the court ordered Wildmon and the AFA to issue a correction to this misrepresentation within ninety days.[14] It was a rare victory during a period of conservative panic over queer art.

Wojnarowicz's work again ignited controversy in 2010 when the National Portrait Gallery included a four-minute version of the unfinished film *A Fire in My Belly* in the exhibit "Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture." The film shows an image of a crucifix laying on the ground with ants crawling on it. Congressional leaders and conservative media, much of it led by the Catholic League's William Donohue, attacked this stand-alone image as anti-Christian hate speech. Under fire, the Smithsonian pulled the film from the exhibit.[15] Note again the habits of seeing revealed in this panic, specifically how the image appears to be immediately readable and transparent for some viewers, even absent its contextualization within the immediate film from which it is drawn, much less within the broader "Hide/Seek" exhibit dealing with sexual difference, the artistic world of the East Village, Wojnarowicz's life, or the social and political conditions of the United States and Mexico in the 1980s from which many images in the film are drawn. Is it immediately and universally obvious what ants crawling on a crucifix would mean? For many conservative Christians, the answer has been yes.

The visual panics over feminist and queer art since the 1980s suggest two trends: First, sexual imagery is reduced to pornography and figured against Christian morality, and second, religious content is labeled blasphemous or sacrilegious (think Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*). These interpretive moves draw from assumptions about common sense—that one knows something when one sees it, especially in the case of obscenity.[16] Yet a historical lens suggests deeper

[11]Cynthia Carr, *Fire in the Belly: The Life and Times of David Wojnarowicz* (New York, 2012).

[12]David Wojnarowicz, "Postcards from America: X-Rays from Hell," in *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (London, 1992), 111–23, here 114.

[13]National Endowment for the Arts, "Fact Sheet on American Family Association Fundraising Advertisement," Feb. 13, 1990, in *Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts*, ed. Richard Bolton (New York, 1992), 152–3, here 153.

[14]*Wojnarowicz v. American Family Association*, 745 F. Supp 130 (1990).

[15]"Bullying and Censorship," *New York Times*, Dec. 6, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/07/opinion/07tue4.html?mcubz=3 (accessed Sept. 1, 2017); Holland Cotter, "As Ants Crawl Over Crucifix, Dead Artist Is Assailed Again," *New York Times*, Dec. 6, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/11/arts/design/11ants.html?mcubz=3 (accessed Sept. 1, 2017).

[16]The often-cited line about pornography that "I know it when I see it" is from *Jacobellis v. Ohio*. 378 U.S., 197 (Stewart, J., concurring).

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David Wojnarowicz's *Untitled from the Ant Series (Spirituality)*, 1988–1989. Courtesy of the Estate of David Wojnarowicz and P•P•O•W, New York. The four-minute unfinished film, *A Fire in My Belly*, can be viewed online https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZhpG7Gtqrrc.

habits of interpretation that we should consider—and that we might bring to bear on the controversy surrounding *Fun Home*. Looking at moral panics over feminist and queer art—including the emphases on both pornography and what are taken to be anti-Christian images—may prod us toward what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls a "reparative reading" as opposed to a paranoid one.[17] To return to the controversy over *Fun Home*, a reparative reading might ask about the habits of interpretation undergirding conservative Christian reaction to sexual stories and images.

The pitched political battles currently waged over religious versus sexual freedom are rooted not only in paranoid thinking but also in the limited vocabulary most Americans now have for seeing the erotic and the religious (and especially for considering them jointly). That Duke freshman—like many conservative Christians—cites the Bible as his reason for not engaging sexual imagery like that depicted in *Fun Home*. Yet one wonders what he, as a self-avowed reader of the Bible, makes of passages celebrating the erotic in language that borders on what many Americans would now define as pornographic. In Song of Solomon, for instance, a woman describes the touch of her lover's genitals as "a bag of myrrh that lies between my breasts" (Song of Solomon 1:13 NRSV). In a longer passage, a man waxes poetically about his partner's body: "How graceful are your feet in sandals, O queenly maiden! Your rounded thighs are like jewels, the work of a master hand. Your navel is a rounded bowl that never lacks mixed wine. Your belly is a heap of wheat, encircled with lilies. Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle" (Song of Solomon 7:1–3 NRSV).

[17]Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC, 2003), 123–52.

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These are only two examples to demonstrate that biblical texts do not unilaterally denounce sexual imagery or call for Christians to avoid it—at least not in any consistent fashion. Nor of course do biblical texts provide a clear guide to sexual ethics that most modern Christians would want to adopt—consider how common incest, rape, and other forms of sexual assault appear in these texts.[18] Sexual imagery is neither antithetical to biblical texts nor uncommon in the long history of Christian art, in which one can easily find medieval and Renaissance depictions of Jesus lactating into a chalice or the slit in his side refigured as a vulva. Catherine of Siena even describes receiving Jesus's foreskin to wear as a wedding ring.[19] Would such imagery, almost totally forgotten in our historical imagination, be considered sacrilegious today?

As historian Caroline Walker Bynum has argued, medieval Christians engaged with bodily and divine imagery in ways that seem odd—and often oddly sexual—to modern viewers. Perhaps as odd as a crucifix covered in ants or submerged in urine. Yet, she reminds us, "We might find in medieval art and literature some suggestion of a symbolic richness our own lives and rituals seem to lack."[20] I read in Bynum's work a nostalgia for the kind of symbolic richness glimpsed not only in medieval art but also in the polysemic work of David Wojnarowicz, or Andres Serrano, or even in biblical texts. We have seen what habits of vision a paranoid style allows: I hope we might learn to see differently.

Anthony Petro is assistant professor of religion and women's, gender, and sexuality studies at Boston University. His first book, *After the Wrath of God: AIDS, Sexuality, and American Religion* (New York, 2015), examined the history of U.S. religious responses to the AIDS crisis and their role in the promotion of a national moral discourse on sex. His current project, *Provoking Religion: Sex, Art, and the Sacred in Modern America*, revisits the history of culture wars debates about art, sexuality, and religion in the United States, including how queer and feminist artists have engaged religious themes and ritual in their work since the 1970s.

[18]See Jennifer Wright Knust, *Unprotected Texts: The Bible's Surprising Contradictions about Sex and Desire* (New York, 2011).

[19]Caroline Walker Bynum, "The Body of Christ in the Later Middle Ages: A Reply to Leo Steinberg," *Renaissance Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (Autumn 1986): 399–439.

[20]Bynum, "The Body of Christ," 438.

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