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“Beware the Hostile Fag”

Acidic Intimacies and Gay Male Consciousness-Raising
in *The Boys in the Band*

RAMZI FAWAZ

Speak Pains to Recall Pains

—the Chinese Revolution

Tell It Like It Is

—the Black Revolution

Bitch, Sisters, Bitch

—the Final Revolution

—New York Radical Women
meeting poster composed
by Kathie Sarachild (1968)

I need to be together with other gay men. We have not been together—we’ve not had enough self respect for that. . . . We need to recognize one another wherever we are, start talking to each other. . . . We need consciousness-raising groups and communes. Our gay souls have nearly been stomped to death in that desert called America. If we are to bloom, we can only do it together.

—Gary Alinder, “My Gay Soul” (1970)

In November 1968, Kathie Sarachild, a founding member of the Redstockings, an early collective of the women’s liberation movement, presented an

outline for a new form of feminist political practice at the first national Women's Liberation Conference. She dubbed this practice "consciousness-raising" or "CR." Consciousness-raising was a collective practice of publicly speaking personal truth to uncover shared experiences of patriarchal oppression. In Sarachild's words, CR required women to meet in "rap groups" or "bitch sessions," in which they would "recall and share [their] bitter experiences" of sexism.¹ In making those recollections public, consciousness-raising would create a space for "evaluating [women's] feelings" and provide the context for "cross-examination," in which women could interrogate and formulate judgments about their relationship to structures of gendered oppression.² Such a practice, it was theorized, would link the personal with the political in the most systematic and immediately visceral way, encouraging women "to look for explanations for each part of [their] history in terms of the social or cultural dynamic created by sexism—rather than in terms of the personal dynamic."³ Having recently made the radical political decision to cut ties with the New Left and the liberal wing of the National Organization for Women, leaders of women's liberation were keen to develop a mode of internal critique that could provide women with tools to make many more such decisions for their political freedom.⁴

In April 1968, six months before Sarachild's speech, Mart Crowley's explosive play *The Boys in the Band* appeared Off Broadway. Without precedent, the play depicted a group of gay men engaged in a series of fiery debates about the nature of gay desire, identity, and social life that unfold across a single evening at a birthday party gone awry. At a "smartly appointed duplex apartment in the East Fifties" of Midtown Manhattan, a diverse circle of eight gay men—among them a bookstore clerk, a fashion photographer, a public school teacher, and a luxury antiques dealer—convene to celebrate the birthday of their mutual friend Harold.⁵ When Alan, a homophobic former college roommate of the host, Michael, crashes the party, his presence brings repressed tensions among the group to the surface. These tensions overwhelm the party atmosphere, resulting in a series of painful revelations about the men's internalized self-hatred, experiences of unrequited love and sexual shame, and their individual forms of resistance to a homophobic society. If Sarachild's speech articulated the form and content of a developing practice of feminist consciousness-raising rooted in collective public dialogues, *The Boys in the Band* appeared to enact an early version of this practice directly in front of theater audiences by presenting one of the longest and most searing public "bitch sessions" ever performed on the American stage.

Just as feminist consciousness-raising centralized the importance of *group process* in the form of a women's conversation circle as a generative site for "pooling" experiences of sexism, the second half of *The Boys in the Band* similarly presents a group of gay men arranged in a circle, passionately sharing experiences of homophobia; whereas feminist consciousness-raising underscored the value of women's feelings as a source of knowledge that might allow them to speak truth to power, so too the members of this gay male group are driven by feelings of rage, bitterness, and sadness to rail against homophobia's power to constrain their social existence; and finally, whereas one of feminist consciousness-raising's central goals was the production of *concepts* for analyzing the logics of male domination that underwrote women's lives, in the bitchy and hilarious witticisms that the gay male characters of *The Boys in the Band* sling at one another and at the heterosexual world that shuns them, they articulate concepts they have developed to identify and frustrate the homophobic logics that underwrote *their* lives.⁶

With the 1970 film adaptation of Crowley's play, *The Boys in the Band* became not only the first explicitly gay movie distributed to a mass audience but also arguably the only Hollywood film to visually represent and model consciousness-raising as it was taken up and adapted by different publics, including urban gay men. By March 1970, the month of the film's release, CR had been a staple of radical feminist practice for more than sixteen months, while CR practices had been introduced to the Gay Liberation Front, the vanguard organization of the gay liberation movement, by the Redstockings member Karla Jay in November of the previous year.⁷ When Jay and coeditor Allen Young published *Out of the Closets: Voices of Gay Liberation*, the first U.S. anthology of LGBT political writing, in January 1972, the collection included A Gay Male Group's "Notes on Gay Male Consciousness-Raising," an adaptation of Sarachild's CR program for gay men that, according to the writing of other contributors, was indicative of the forms of CR gay men had been engaging since 1970.⁸ If the 1968 theatrical version of *The Boys in the Band* appeared to presage or anticipate the moment of consciousness-raising's ascendancy in feminist practice, the 1970 film appeared on the other side of CR's full institution in both feminist and gay liberationist circles. Far from being out-of-date by the time of its release, the film adaptation of *The Boys in the Band* made its debut at exactly the moment when feminist and gay consciousness-raising began to diffuse into the wider culture; in this context, the film accrued a host of new meanings beyond its theatrical version, now not only depicting the seeming fractiousness of gay men as a group but also documenting gay men's

heart-wrenching emotional labor to negotiate newly “liberated” identities and social worlds *despite* the homophobic logics that continued to plague their lives.

This chapter reinterprets the film adaptation of *The Boys in the Band* as a text that indexes the early adoption of radical feminist political practices within the gay male social culture of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the “truth game” the men play in the film’s second half, the characters are positioned in a circle, while engaging in a protracted “bitch session” in which they “recall and share [their] bitter experiences” of unrequited love. These recollections of trauma around same-sex desire, homophobia, and their social consequences enable both the characters in the film and its viewers to take into account a broader range of gay male experience than either institutional homophobia or internalized self-hatred allow for, thereby enacting feminist consciousness-raising’s stated conceptual goal of “building a collage of similar experiences . . . by pooling description of the forms oppression has taken in each individual’s life.”⁹ In the movie, this practice of “pooling” multiple, often incommensurate lived experiences or perspectives on the world—what the political theorist Hannah Arendt identifies as the foundation of “enlarged” or “representative thinking”—involves members of the group verbally relating their distinctive stories but also the plot’s canny visual movement between them, so that we “see” each character both figuratively and literally in a way that provides a kaleidoscopic view of gay male lived experience.¹⁰ It is from this position of “enlarged thinking” that the men inch toward a new set of standards for making critical judgments, ones that equip them to better understand their social and psychic location in an emergent and diverse gay male social culture. The struggle to arrive at those standards is the film’s version of consciousness-raising, for it both results in the characters’ uneven movement to new locations in relation to their experiences of homophobia (and their responses to it) and the potential solicitation of viewers to formulate their own judgments not only about each character and their conflicted interactions but also about the broader social consequences of homophobia and sexism, that is, to “form an opinion . . . by taking account of other views.”¹¹

This process is depicted in the movie as emotionally (and sometimes physically) violent and extraordinarily intellectually demanding; the breathless pace of barbed speech in the narrative suggests the level of cognitive and verbal skill required to navigate the complexities of gay male affective bonds, variously organized around feelings of smugness and superiority, loneliness and intense desire for community, and love tempered by

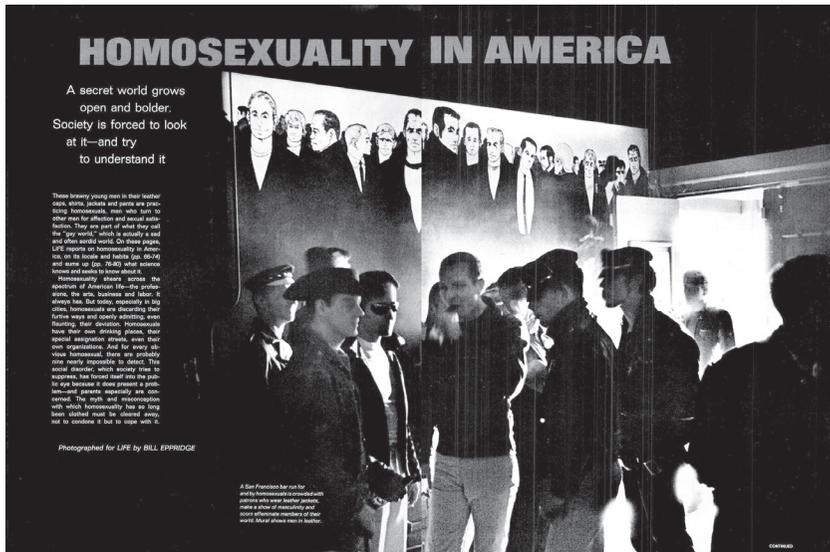
insecurity and self-doubt. Yet the film’s version of CR—impassioned, angry, unpredictable, and uncensored—revealed some of the unexpected volatility that this practice could unleash (a volatility feminists often assumed they could control through the elaborated rules set forth by the Redstockings’ original CR manifesto).¹² *The Boys in the Band* underscored the necessity of formulating an equally powerful practice of *critical judgment* within *all* forms of social interaction—not merely the aspects of one’s life amenable to politicization—where critical judgment is understood as the ability to distinguish claims motivated by insecurity, unrequited desire, or misdirected blame from claims that accurately identify social injustice. The film allows us to see how political forms like the feminist consciousness-raising program and its imagined circle of interlocutors could provide a powerful analogy for lived social forms like the gay male friendship circle; in turn, the movie’s ability to use film form to visualize such overlaps allows it to function as a potential cultural transmitter of consciousness-raising in both its structure and its values. My contention is that this practice, as the film presents it, empowers its participants to develop more effective judgments of one another *and* the systems of power that oppress them, consequently strengthening social bonds between queers, women, and sexual and gender outlaws—bonds that became newly imaginable at the very historical moment when members of the women’s and gay liberation movements were abandoning the known worlds of sexism, homophobia, and self-hatred, in search of an uncharted territory of freedom, sexual liberation, and rich sociality.

Acidic Intimacies

The Boys in the Band has been lambasted by critics for its judgmental, bitchy tone and for the vitriol that the characters, particularly Michael, spew at their supposed friends and intimates. As William Scroggie recounts, “In 1971, gay liberationist Dennis Altman called *The Boys in the Band* ‘Crowley’s portrait of unredeemed misery,’” and “another gay liberationist, Peter Fisher . . . wrote ‘*The Boys in the Band* . . . presents a stereotypical picture of unhappy people unable to come to terms with themselves.’”¹³ The by-now-clichéd criticisms of the film’s negativity fail to explain the conceptual power of the movie on three fronts. First, by focusing on the alienation such hostility among the guests implies about late 1960s gay male experience, critics ignore the powerful *intimacy* that underlies the conflicted engagements depicted in the movie. Despite the frustrations the men express

about their social and sexual lives, *The Boys in the Band* is a showcase in *acidic intimacies*, or painful but deep-rooted social bonds, rather than an exposé on gay male anomie. These intimacies are *acidic* in the sense that they register the bitterness or sting of bonds cemented through shared knowledge of another gay man's insecurities, manipulations, and character flaws. Early in the film, Michael tries to align himself with Alan's genteel values by piously claiming to his friend and former lover Donald, "Believe it or not, there was a time in my life when I didn't go around *announcing* I was a faggot. . . . I didn't come out until after college," to which Donald retorts, "It seems to me that the first time we tricked we met in a gay bar on Third Avenue during your *junior* year." "Cunt," Michael responds with a sarcastic smile. These instances of barbed retort, dotting the entire narrative, display the double-edge of shared lived experiences that also make all parties vulnerable to being called out for self-deception and evasion.

Second, critics' condemnation of the film's depiction of regressive gay male stereotypes willfully subordinates both the formal structure of the narrative and the social scene into which the characters are placed, in favor of reading the film as a decontextualized depiction of rigid character types. Across the film, we witness or hear about numerous forms of gay male sociality. In the film's opening sequence, following a kaleidoscopic montage of the characters, the movie displays a panorama of a gay bar packed with men



Life portrays the dark interior of a gay leather bar in 1964.



The Boys in the Band depicts the lively, upbeat social life of a New York gay bar in 1970.

socializing. This long shot provides visual evidence of a vibrant and diverse gay male social culture in late-1960s and early-1970s New York City. The scene visually echoes and contradicts the famed 1964 *Life* magazine photo spread “Homosexuality in America,” which opens with a foreboding image of the darkened interior of a gay leather bar with a group of shadowed faces amid the crowd of “deviants.” A far cry from this “sad and sordid world,” the bar in *The Boys in the Band* is brightly lit and overflowing with smiling, laughing faces, a site of convivial flirtation.¹⁴

In the same opening sequence, we see men cruise each other, while throughout the film we hear conversation detailing the social conventions of gay bathhouses, reminiscences about the communal experience of Fire Island, furtive visits to gay bars with closeted college chums, the circulation of shared cultural references between gay friends (from Bette Davis to Tennessee Williams), and globe-trotting sexual adventures; these experiences indicate the expansive range of gay male sociality across differences of race, class, and sexual and cultural taste, rather than isolation or homogeneity. Moreover, the intimacies between the characters are strikingly heterogeneous: we see gay best friends (Michael and Harold), ex-lovers (Michael and Donald), former college roommates (Michael and Alan), former tricks (Donald and Larry), the polyamorous couple and the ménage à trois (Larry and Hank), and of course, the loosely knitted, but surprisingly intimate, gay friendship circle itself. Even as each of these forms of sociality potentially presents a categorical “type” of interaction that has stereotypical features—the stranger sociality of gay men who trick together like Donald and

Larry or the performative intensity of the effeminate “screaming queen” like Emory—the particular ways each character inhabits these types in relation to others become the basis for the film’s depiction of a crisis in judgment. In essence, the film asks, how does one form objective opinions, and make definitive claims, about a way of life that has become so extraordinarily expansive, so irreducibly particular, so distinctly diverse?

The Boys in the Band responds to this question through a relentlessly dialogic narrative: put simply, the narrative is driven by ceaseless, rapid-fire talk, producing a ballistic experience of constant call and response, witticism and reply, argument and rebuttal. The hatefulness and ridicule expressed by characters are feelings performed in the company of others and felicitous of response in fierce interaction. Acidic speech is repeatedly named as such—as when Harold describes Michael’s barbs as “hateful”—and those who speak it are called out for their actions. Some, like Michael, exhibit an almost manic drive *to be held accountable by others*—that is, confronted and forced to respond to criticisms of one’s actions—which is understood as a potentially therapeutic outcome of being fairly judged. Michael plays his level of hostility toward the group to Harold’s absolute limit, attacking his friend so relentlessly (even after Harold warns, “I know this game you’re playing. . . . I can beat you at it. So don’t push me.”) that it is as though he unconsciously seeks to elicit a response that would refuse, and thereby provide insight about, his bitterness.

No guest leaves Michael’s apartment until the very end of their “hostile” dialogue, committing to the psychic and social consequences that might unfold from their sparring. Equally crucial, upon evening’s end, Harold’s parting words to Michael are “Call you tomorrow,” while Donald affirms he will be back next Saturday to “spend the night.” Despite what Harold calls the “fervor with which [Michael] annihilate[s],” Michael’s antagonism toward his company is strangely *productive* of their social bonds. By the closing shot, we know more about each character, they know more about one another, and they have explained themselves and their experiences with greater depth than ever before; yet knowledge of Alan’s “true” sexuality, of whether the evening’s events will alter his homophobic views, or whether the men will leave politically enlightened remains open. In this way, the film embraces the power of dialogic engagement in the form of consciousness-raising but presses back against the radical feminist assumption that the political consequences of such a practice could or should be predictably coordinated as a linear movement to political enlightenment.

Third, and finally, critics' willful overlooking of the film's social dimensions has led to a related failure to account for its rebellious, anti-homophobic spirit. In the characters' bombastic refusal to accept the specter of homophobic judgment (either in external sources like the heterosexual superiority of Alan or internal ones like Michael's disgust at his friends' flamboyance), they embody the spirit of radical feminist and gay liberationist politics *affectively*. My reading of the film takes seriously the idea, central to feminist and gay CR, that gay men's *feelings* about their oppression might function as a source of political knowledge; the film argues that we might learn something fundamental about how homophobia functions from these angry "screaming queens" precisely *because* they are willing to scream about its painful consequences. In 1968, Sarachild wrote, "We're saying that when [women] had hysterical fits, when we took things 'too' personally, that we weren't underneath our feelings, but responding with our feelings correctly to a given situation of injustice."¹⁵ Echoing this logic, A Gay Male Group's "Notes on Gay Male Consciousness-Raising" opens by acknowledging that "*Gay males feel pain.*"¹⁶ Both statements recognize that one's emotional responses to sexism and homophobia, rather than being personal or indulgent, are legitimate evidence of the unjust workings of patriarchal power. The text's willingness to represent painful feelings onstage and on-screen has led many critics and viewers to dismiss *The Boys in the Band* as depicting the worst aspects of gay male identity and experience; yet this interpretation colludes with a homophobic and sexist logic that views intense emotionality as immature, denigrating the possibility that negative emotions might be an acute register of homophobic injustice and, consequently, a rebellious act against it.

Consider a scene near the conclusion of the film: after various members of the group have narrated stories of unrequited love, Michael confronts Alan about his cruel shunning of their mutual college friend Justin, a gay man with whom Alan was purportedly in a romantic friendship but whom he cut off when Justin verbalized his gay desires. Michael rages, "You ended the friendship, Alan, because you couldn't face the truth about yourself. You could go along, sleeping with Justin, as long as he lied to himself and you lied to yourself and you both dated girls and labeled yourselves men and called yourselves just fond friends. But Justin finally had to be honest. . . . You couldn't take it and so you destroyed the friendship. . . . [To] this day he still remembers the treatment—the scars he got from you. . . . Call him and apologize." This moment is easily dismissed because of the questionable motives

behind Michael's demand and the potential misfire of his assumption that Alan is gay; yet, in the context of gay liberation's bold refusal of "marriage, family, and home that our society holds up as normal," what could possibly be more rebellious than a gay man demanding accountability from a straight man for his homophobic violence against another gay man?¹⁷ Like Sarachild's injunction for women to see their feelings as a guide to a theory of their oppression, Michael takes Justin's emotional "scars" as a legitimate register of homophobic injustice; those scars offer Michael an opening to theorize and call out the heterosexist logics that allow Alan to "label himself a man" and take advantage of the privileges that that identity entails.

This bold representation and legitimation of gay men's feelings was enabled by consciousness-raising practices in both women's and gay liberation that embraced the value of cross-examination, allowed participants to develop a voice within a collectively organized political practice, and worked to deconstruct resistances to consciousness-raising, which, according to the original feminist CR program, included "false identification with the oppressor," "rugged individualism," and "excusing the oppressor."¹⁸ Yet *The Boys in the Band's* conceptual innovation of feminist CR was to refuse the feminist premise that consciousness-raising must take place in a non-judgmental space; it understood that for sexism and homophobia to be appropriately judged, those who might best be equipped to lob such a critique would need to work through their own conflicted judgments about themselves and one another. Perhaps most daringly, the film catalyzes this necessary but difficult struggle by materializing the force of homophobia in an actual figure, Michael's former college roommate Alan. Whereas feminist CR imagined patriarchy as an abstracted oppressor a given group would identify, analyze, and finally take action against from an initial location of relative psychic safety, in *The Boys in the Band*, homophobia is embodied in a person who aggressively inhabits the space of the gay gathering, demanding not merely abstract analysis but substantive response in the form of critical judgments about the men's relationships to homophobic privilege and power.

Performing Judgment

The Boys in the Band is a relentlessly judgmental text. From one perspective, the characters' negative exposures of one another's personal failures and inadequacies are directly opposed to the founding feminist CR principle

of nonjudgmentalness. As Pamela Allen explained in her description of CR group process in 1969, what is important “is the fact that someone listens and does not ridicule. . . . Unless women are given a non-judgmental space in which to express themselves, we will never have the strength or the perception to deal with the ambivalences which are a part of us all.”¹⁹ In *The Boys in the Band*, the men’s judgmentalness and ridiculing of one another, the domination of the conversation by a single member of the group (Michael), the use (and abuse) of alcohol and other mood-altering substances, and the interruptions of one another’s testimony are all elements that undermine the value of nonjudgment in a “safe” space. Moreover, the baldly misogynistic language used by many of the characters—including such sexist terms as “slut,” “cunt,” and “bitch”—alongside the deep phobia of effeminacy that Alan, Michael, and Hank exhibit, might seem to immediately undercut the film’s performance of feminist practices and ideals. Yet such qualities uncomfortably, but frankly, register the lingering power of internalized homophobia among gay men—captured in the fear of being seen as “incomplete” or “womanly” men—while also suggesting the repurposing and reuse of sexist terms as part of the playful, bitchy, acidic intimacies developed within gay male social life. From this perspective, the stated commitment to nonjudgmentalness in feminist CR implied a naively utopian wish that group process might uncover an essentially conflict-free female experience for women to draw on in achieving their political goals, downplaying the fact that women themselves might also feel the lingering pull of patriarchal demands to uphold true femininity or might simply feel rage, meanness, or insecurity toward other women.

Unsurprisingly, testimonies from practitioners of feminist and gay CR in this period reveal that the lived experience of CR groups rarely achieved their lofty ideals of nonjudgmentalness, often exposing complex emotional conflicts and underscoring deep inequalities between participants. Describing one of the Redstockings’ first CR meetings, Karla Jay recounts Kathie Sarachild’s overzealous interruptions and judgments of participants’ testimony as undermining Sarachild’s own CR program injunction to *listen to other women*; in an account of gay male CR practices in the first gay men’s living collective in New York City in 1971, John Knoebel explains how jealousies, unacknowledged racism and classism, and conflicting political commitments led to the breakdown of the collective’s social bonds despite their consistent engagement in CR group process; and, perhaps most movingly, in a description of participating in a six-month-long CR group in New York City, June Arnold documents an epiphanic moment when

disagreements about each woman's view of her sex life led some members to exclaim jubilantly, "I guess we're not going to get to any conclusions from this session—we're all saying completely different things!' 'Beautiful! Maybe that's what liberation really is.'"²⁰ These testimonies show how CR unleashed unexpected and messy conflicts in the attempted movement between the personal and the political for women and gay men alike. Feminist CR's negative stance toward *judgmentalness* had the downside of potentially silencing the socially and politically necessary act of *judging*, that is, forming an opinion about and developing substantive responses to an object of collective concern. Consequently, the negative and conflicted aspects of the men's dialogue in *The Boys in the Band* encourage viewers to develop their own critical faculty of judgment, in order to parse different forms of criticism precisely, from the most personal character assassinations to the most generative rebuttals of entrenched thinking.

The film produces a distinction between the cultivated practice of gay male *judgmentalness* (or "bitchiness"), on the one hand, and the faculty of *critical judgment*, on the other. Yet it does not place these categories in a developmental narrative, in which an individual evolves out of the former into a mature, "adult" capacity for objective judgment. Rather, *The Boys in the Band* acknowledges the conceptual power of both judgmentalness and judgment in gay male social life, while stressing the importance of *distinguishing* them. In the narrative, judgmentalness ironically functions as a form of gay male community building; it is a highly developed code of verbal sparring that requires common cultural references and the recognition of others' personal characters. When deployed outside the gay male collective, judgmentalness is a useful weapon against homophobia, a cultivated condescension toward straight culture and its banal, normalizing force; within the gay male social milieu, it often functions as a loving form of social antagonism among friends that implies an intimate "knowingness" of one another's flaws. This is exhibited in A Gay Male Group's "Notes on Gay Male Consciousness-Raising," whose lengthy catalog of different forms of "resisting consciousness" (more numerous and specific than those named in Sarachild's original program) admitted a willingness to lodge judgments against gay men's cultivated habits of evasion, including "continual use of drugs and drink during meetings" (think Michael), "coming late to meetings or missing them with no excuse" (think Harold), and "not revealing physical attractions" (think Donald).²¹ There is something undeniably bitchy about this catalog of *resisting consciousness* that suggests an insider's knowing side-eye to often unaccounted-for gay male bad behavior; *The Boys in the Band*

takes this willingness to express judgmentalness to the extreme, making *accountability*, rather than nonjudgmentalness, its central value.

Early in the film, as Michael readies for his guests, he asks Donald, "What are you so depressed about? Other than the usual *everything*, I mean?" When Donald refuses to answer, Michael sarcastically replies, "Well, if you're not going to tell me, how can we have a conversation *in depth*—a warm, rewarding, meaningful friendship?" Michael bitchily calls out Donald's melancholic tendencies, while couching his barb in genuine care for his friend's anxieties. Even as he pokes fun at social "depth" amid the pervasive superficiality of gay social culture, he lovingly elicits the emotional confession he denigrates: Donald finally divulges his struggles over his gay identity and its potential rootedness in parental disappointment and "a neurotic compulsion not to succeed." Donald's miming of the clichéd narrative of abnormal childhood development, supported by his psychologist (and by a homophobic American culture), enables Michael to subject this story to critique: "Christ, how sick analysts must get of hearing how Mommy and Daddy made their darlin' into a fairy." The exchange presents gay male judgmentalness as an alternative value system that cannily sees behind and deconstructs the clichés of pathologizing definitions of gay male identity, consequently producing more humane intimacies between gay men (while brilliantly turning the accusation of homosexuality's "sickness" back onto the psychotherapists who enforce these stories).

If gay male judgmentalness can produce alternative intimacies outside the gaze of societal and clinical homophobia, *critical judgment* serves as a tool for holding other gay men accountable for their speech and actions. Critical judgment involves the capacity to take in multiple viewpoints on the same circumstances in order to form substantive opinions about them that have qualitative weight—that is, not simply pointing out inadequacies or problems but suggesting what should be done about them.²² Critical judgment then, is about the production of normative standards of social conduct. If bitchiness brings gay men together, critical judgment allows them to stand apart, to call one another out, to hold others accountable. According to *The Boys in the Band*, both are crucial to the maintenance of heterogeneous community; it is their confusion, or the inability to distinguish between them, the film suggests, that is *destructive* of collective life.

The movie's array of characters presents viewers with a range of perspectives from which to look on the evening's events, yet the film frames this larger set of outlooks within three primary *models* for judging the content of the party, embodied by its three central characters. In the naïve

all-American blueblood Alan, the cynical yet emotionally vulnerable Michael, and the self-effacing Harold, the film presents distinct models of judgment that take different founding criteria and have varied consequences for queer social life. These models can be understood respectively as the ideological, the ambivalent, and the judicious. The film typologically reduces each character to these frameworks but sets them in dynamic interaction, with explosive and unpredictable results.

The film presents Alan, Michael's former college roommate and a Washington, DC, patrician, as an allegorical figure for societal homophobia. His judgment against homosexuality precedes his physical presence at the gay male gathering. When Michael explains to Donald his squeamishness about introducing Alan to a group of "screaming queens," he explains that Alan and his "social type" have "certain standards" that "we have to acknowledge." Those standards are aligned with normative heterosexuality, proper gender performance, and discretion regarding sexual impropriety; as Alan later explains to Michael, "I couldn't care less what people do—as long as they don't do it in public—or—try to force their ways on the whole damned world." In his view, "the whole damned world" is a normatively heterosexual one, and the performance of nontraditional masculinity or same-sex desire constitutes that norm's forceful violation.

Alan, then, represents a judgment informed by the belief in universally shared (heterosexual) standards by which all external realities can be measured; these "standards" are so pervasive that, as Michael's declaration confirms, "*we* have to acknowledge them." It is no surprise that Alan experiences a visceral revulsion at Emory's exaggerated femininity, privately explaining to Michael with barely restrained disgust, "he just seems like such a goddamn pansy." The rage that Alan directs at Emory is an outcome of Emory's daring *refusal* to acknowledge the universal value of Alan's heterosexual masculine privilege. Alan repeatedly invokes the universality of his position when he entreats Michael with the phrase "you know" to indicate their presumed shared values regarding the public, flamboyant sexuality Emory represents: "Oh come on man, *you know* me—*you know* how I feel—your private life is your affair" (my italics). Invoking a transparent understanding between "men," Alan rhetorically constitutes the universality of his position by presuming similitude of feelings across personalities and social positions. Though Michael initially presents Alan's position as understandable, even justifiable by certain social standards, their private conversation unhinges his initial alignment with homophobic propriety. Against Alan's repeated invocations of the commonly known and universally shared

positions he holds, Michael engages in an act of cross-examination—a central practice of feminist consciousness-raising—that reorients the assumed universality of Alan's worldview toward the *particularity* of his social position. In response to Alan's assumption that Michael knows his viewpoint, Michael coldly replies, "No, I didn't know that about you," and demands to know, "Why are you here?" and "What were you crying about on the telephone?" These requests reduce Alan to the specificity of his own actions.

In Michael's cross-examination, he exhibits a second form of judgment best described as ambivalent. Michael is undoubtedly the most judgmental character in *The Boys in the Band*, bringing down world-rending condemnations against every party guest, including himself. Yet Michael's claims flicker between a biting moralism, exhibited in his bitchy *judgmentalness*, and a righteous quest for justice, exhibited in his *critical judgment* of homophobia. These positions compete as contradictory motives animating Michael's speech and action and are embodied in his concept of "The Christ-was-I-drunk-last-night syndrome." He explains the phrase: "You know, when you made it with some guy in school, and the next day when you faced each other there was always a lot of crap about 'Man, was I drunk last night! Christ, I don't remember a thing!'" Michael uses this phrase to indicate both an immature form of self-loathing instilled in gay men about their sexual desires—one that requires them to pretend that sexual liaisons had never happened—and the lies that straight men use to deny their sexual activities with other men. The phrase captures the element of CR group process that Pamela Allen called "analyzing," in which CR participants respond to their aggregated experiences of sexism by developing concepts that describe and illuminate the social conditions of women's oppression.²³ Yet whereas feminist CR imagined a pure progression from sharing experiences to conceptual analysis that always landed on the side of women as an oppressed class, Michael's concepts for identifying homophobic lies are ambivalently produced in the thick of living life as a gay man in uneven relationship to others who share his sexual identity. A concept like "The Christ-was-I-drunk-last-night syndrome" is ambivalent in the sense that it reveals feelings of bitterness toward *both* the privilege of heteronormative ideology *and* the hypocritical self-deceptions of gay men. Michael seems intent on overcoming his ambivalence by analyzing all parties with concepts he believes will reveal their "true" selves beneath the lies they tell themselves.

Michael's obsessive pursuit of "the facts" in all things leads him to assume that certain truths—for instance, Alan's potential homosexuality—merely need to be uncovered through forceful revelation. This zealous

truth seeking reveals Michael's continued commitment to universal values, though perhaps reconstituted ones organized less by heterosexism (like Alan's) than by gay moralism. In one instance, Michael harangues Harold about his self-torturing beauty regimen: "Standing before a bathroom mirror for hours and hours before you can walk out on the street. And looking no different after Christ knows how many . . . ointments and creams. . . . Yes, you've got scars on your face—but they're not that bad and if you'd leave yourself alone you wouldn't have any more than you've already awarded yourself." Michael's ambivalence is apparent in his simultaneous judgmentalness toward his friend's unhealthy vanity and his critical judgment of the pernicious cultural beauty standards that constrain gay men. It is the increasing *inability* to distinguish between these positions—brought on, in part, by the contradictory demands of a homophobic society—that marks Michael as a "hostile fag"; rather than villainize that hostility, *The Boys in the Band* presents it as a dynamic force that can potentially bring into being new forms of consciousness.

Michael's ambivalence is on the cusp of the revolutionary. Throughout the evening, Harold comically calls Michael's frenzied attacks a form of "turning," a figurative centripetal revolution producing enough dynamic tension to spin outward yet remaining tightly coiled; moreover, throughout the first half of the movie, Michael is repeatedly filmed standing before a wall on his patio chalked with the words "Summer 1968," referencing the year of the New Left's political implosion and fracturing into a new spate of radical movements. Michael's figurative "turning" presents him as poised to jettison one set of pernicious universal values but unable to imagine what the world might look like devoid of another set of shared values decoupled from gay moralism (hence his investment in the Catholic church, what Harold calls his "insurance policy" against life's unpredictability). Harold at one point flatly states, "Michael, . . . you don't know what side of the fence you're on. If somebody says something pro-religion, you're against them. If somebody denies God, you're against *them*. One might say you have a problem in that area."

Harold breaks the deadlock of the "problem" of judgment that Michael's ambivalence and Alan's universalism produce. Irreverent and self-deprecating, Harold has no time for truths that do not help a life flourish. His battles with self-hatred have literally scarred him, and his response to both self-inflicted and societally imposed mutilation is, quite literally, to *laugh*. Harold enters the narrative immediately after Alan's violent assault on Emory midway through the party, walking in on a spectacle of



Summer of 1968.

homophobic rage. Instead of reacting negatively to the events, he calmly reads Emory’s birthday card—a bitchy injunction to “roll over and play dead” (read: be “banged” by the cowboy hustler whom Emory has purchased as his gift)—and explodes into raucous laughter that undercuts the gravity of Alan’s actions. When Michael scolds Harold, “What’s so fucking funny?” Harold retorts, “Life. Life’s a goddam laugh-riot. You remember life.” Harold’s willingness to laugh at even the most bitter aspects of gay experience indicates his openness to being amused by “life” and its over-the-top ridiculousness, while also functioning as a critical weapon that equalizes the playing field between gay and straight. By hyperbolically vocalizing his immense pleasure at Emory’s gift, an offering that would traditionally be deemed distasteful in more “straight” settings, Harold values Emory’s gay sensibilities while debasing Alan’s out-of-control behavior, which appears embarrassingly out of step with gay male conviviality and playfulness. Unlike Alan and Michael, Harold is eminently self-critical and disparages the value of exposure, recognizing the social limitations of acts of cruel revelation. When Michael lobes his acidic criticism of Harold’s beauty regimen, Harold replies, “You’d really like me to compliment you now, for being so honest, wouldn’t you? . . . Slut.” In an act of counter-exposure, Harold reveals the ruse of a certain kind of “truth telling” that speaks in the name of authenticity and justice but is in fact self-serving.

Unlike Michael, whose single conceptual move is to expose, Harold wields a form of *judicious* critical judgment that *discerns* between which truths should remain private and which deserve public airing. Harold’s

discernment is evident in his investment in maintaining a realm of private intimacy among friends, which is the foundation for love in the face of fierce criticism. When Larry asks Harold to tell the group what Michael has engraved on his birthday gift (a photograph of Michael in a silver frame), Harold holds back: “Just . . . something personal.” Despite all that Michael has done to air Harold’s dirty laundry, Harold remains committed to distinguishing between those known intimacies that need to be made public and those that should be held close to the heart. Harold is never framed as inherently morally superior to Michael. As Harold points out, he and Michael “are a match” because of how well they “play each other’s game.” Rather, the film suggests that Harold’s judicious attitude toward *this* particular evening’s events is a consequence of his position relative to Michael’s emotional implosion—that is, Harold’s capacity for judiciousness emerges *in the context of* a dialogic and combative evening of social engagement. The film argues that judiciousness might be one radical consequence of being forced to take into account multiple viewpoints, which Harold is able to do only by witnessing recognizable aspects of his own identity inhabited and performed by others. In light of the perspective this view affords, it is unsurprising that, when Michael finally holds Alan accountable for his actions by demanding he stay for the truth game, Harold says, “Revolution complete.” What Harold initially considers Michael’s ceaseless, insular “turning” becomes a revolution both figurative and literal—an act of rebellion against Alan indicating Michael’s momentary but decisive jettisoning of his ambivalence—that Harold’s judicious viewpoint can discern. The moment signals the completion of a *conceptual* circle of thought that in turn produces the *actual* circle that organizes the game the men play.

“Revolution Complete”

If Alan, Michael, and Harold embody various models of judgment, the truth game that unfolds over the second half of the film sets them in motion by borrowing a dynamic political form, the consciousness-raising circle. Michael sets up a game in which each group member must call the person he has loved most and confess his love to them; each participant is judged by a scoring system that distributes points based on how close he comes to revealing his true feelings to the object of his love. Though the game seems organized around the mere admission of love, it results in various

group members explaining the contexts in which a specific love came into being and the social constraints that prevented its fulfillment. The game's coercive aspect unwittingly produces the conditions under which gay men's feelings are treated as a source of "truth" about lived social relations. Yet this reality is infused with Michael's ambivalence. On the one hand, by publicizing the repeatedly failed trajectory of same-sex desire, Michael seeks to ridicule his friends' naïve hopes for sentimental love in the face of societal homophobia. On the other, by legitimizing the concrete *fact* of gay love, he appears intent on eliciting from Alan a dual confession of closeted homosexuality *and* of repressed love for Justin. Following a classical model of feminist CR, Michael seems to imagine that the game can produce such a powerful sense of universally shared experience of gay male shame that its force will make visible and destroy Alan's hetero-patriarchal edifice. Yet the necessarily dialogic nature of the game Michael sets up means that he is unable to predict the content, delivery, or outcome of the stories that are told in the circle; consequently, the game ends up exposing the truth of gay male *heterogeneity*, rather than essential identity, while also acknowledging the complex and uneven effects of societal homophobia.

This expansive view of gay male heterogeneity models a form of "enlarged thinking" that can respond to conflicted circumstances *in the absence of* universal standards for adjudication. This notion of "enlarged" or "representative thinking" is captured by Arendt when she explains that critical judgment requires that "I form an opinion by considering a given issue from different viewpoints, by making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent; that is, I represent them. . . . The more people's standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue, . . . the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking and the more valid my final conclusions, my opinion."²⁴ In the truth game's multiplicitous view of who gay men are and how their experiences and desires might alter what counts as "normal," it becomes a living rebuttal to Alan's universalism. It transforms consciousness-raising from a practice striving toward unity into a process that demands substantive responses to heterogeneity, which, according to writers like Jay, Arnold, and Vivian Gornick, was often what the *lived* experience of CR practice was felt to be. Gornick describes the experience: "Coming together, as they do, week after week for many months, the women who are 'in a group' begin to exchange an extraordinary sense of multiple identification. . . . Thus looking at one's history and experience in consciousness-raising sessions

is rather like shaking a kaleidoscope and watching all the same pieces rearrange themselves into an altogether other picture [that makes] each piece appear . . . full of unexpected meaning.”²⁵

This cultivation of “multiple identification” is powerfully captured in the tortured exchange between Larry and Hank, in which they overturn numerous expectations about monogamy, proper masculinity, and intimacy. Larry and Hank are the only romantic couple in the group. As handsome, gainfully employed gay men, they seem to embody an ideal of romantic fulfillment that many of the group members long for. Yet from the moment Hank and Larry are introduced in the movie’s opening sequence, their relationship is depicted as strained by jealousies and miscommunication (we first see them together when an irritated Hank shoves his way through a crowded gay bar to pull Larry away from his flirtations). When Michael demands that the two take their turn in the game, they are forced to articulate dramatically different, and potentially incommensurate, outlooks on companionate love.

Hank is attached to monogamy and marriage as expressions of committed love, while Larry believes in polyamory as a release valve that allows long-term relationships to work by granting partners the freedom to explore their sexual relations with others. Rather than opposing these views to each other, the narrative contextualizes each. The script suggests that Hank’s attachment to monogamy may be the outcome of multiple circumstances: his insecurities entering a sexually promiscuous gay male social world after living most of his life as a monogamously partnered straight man; his nostalgic memories of marriage; or perhaps simply habit. Alternatively, Larry explains his desire for polyamory as both an expression of his natural sex drive and an extension of his social life among gay men, an alternative site of personal fulfillment from marriage. What is required is not relinquishing either position but the ability to see from each other’s perspective to develop substantive responses to different contexts for inhabiting gay desire.

The scene of Hank and Larry’s argument accomplishes three key conceptual movements that characterize the truth game more broadly. First, it exposes significant differences among the group members, in this instance differences about what a proper romantic relationship looks like for gay men but in other interactions differences in responses to homophobia, in approaches to racial sensitivity, and in class background. Second, the game publicizes homophobic conditions that prevent the expression of same-sex love. Alan’s universal standards of judgment are potentially undone by the collective stories told but especially by Hank’s narrative. When Alan

vehemently refuses to acknowledge the reality of Hank's homosexuality, calling it "disgusting" and referring to heterosexual affairs as "normal," Hank replies, "It just doesn't always work out that way, Alan." The mere statement that things "don't always work out" in the way of a universally presumed heterosexuality baldly refutes Alan's illusions not only of Hank but of normative heterosexuality as well: to see an effeminate man like Emory claim gay identity is no surprise, but Hank poses an impossible paradox, namely, that a man who appears just like the upright, heterosexual Alan could be gay.

Moreover, the film visually holds characters like Alan to account for their homophobic reactions by relentlessly tracking their expressions of anguish, confusion, and disgust when they seek to disengage from difficult conversations about same-sex desire. In the exchange between Hank and Alan about Hank's homosexuality, Alan abruptly turns away from Hank when Hank admits, "I left my wife for Larry." As Alan turns, he states, "I'm really not interested in hearing about it," to which Michael responds, "Sure you are. Go ahead, Hankela, tell him all about it." When these two lines are spoken, the camera follows Alan's downturned and distressed face but keeps Hank and Michael in view behind him, both refusing to allow him to disconnect from the conversation. This camera work—in which characters' facial expressions and the interlocutors who have elicited them are held together on-screen—doubly formalizes the dialogic work of consciousness-raising that the game is analogous to, not only holding the characters visually accountable to the unfolding dialogue but also reminding viewers that they too are potential participants in the circle.

Finally, the game allows for internal critique among the gay male members of the group, both creating the space for telling stories and allowing each member to hold others accountable for *how* they tell their stories. When Hank tells his sad tale of a failed marriage and a life upended by coming out, Larry refuses Hank's sentimental self-portrait: "Why am I always the goddamned villain in the piece?! If I'm not thought of as a happy-home wrecker, I'm an impossible son of a bitch to live with! . . . It's my right to lead my sex life without answering to anybody. . . . Numerous relations is a part of who I am!" In this powerful moment, Larry refuses the normalizing narrative that reduces gay male promiscuity to a destructive force, instead telling a different story about sexual freedom as an embodied way of relating to others that exceeds any given sexual orientation.

Harold, despite recusing himself from the game, is the character who appears most often in the background of scenes throughout its unfolding. Harold's distanced on-screen presence—underscored by his literal seat

outside the circle—alongside his handful of comic interjections to the men’s stories, signals his mediated engagement in the game, rather than his complete removal from it. As the political theorist Linda Zerilli states, drawing on Arendt, “Judging involves neither becoming identical with you, nor . . . with myself, but ‘thinking in my own identity where actually I am not.’ . . . Outsideness suggests that we understand and judge from a position that is neither identical nor incommensurable but . . . at once separate from and related to that which we judge.”²⁶ Harold’s decision to position himself in such a way that he is like the participants (a gay man) but unlike them (a nonplayer) is exactly what allows him to absorb the multiple viewpoints articulated throughout the evening and formulate a judgment on the basis of those views, rather than any universally predetermined set of values. As a result of staking out this position, by evening’s end, Harold confidently “takes his turn” at the game and renders the following judgment on Michael, one that responds to Michael’s violent exposure of other characters’ inadequacies but also binds him and the other members of the gay male circle together collectively: “Now it’s my turn, Michael. And ready or not, here goes. You’re a sad and pathetic man. You’re a homosexual and you don’t want to be. But there is nothing you can do to change it. Not all your prayers to your God, not all the analysis you can buy in all the years you’ve got left to live. You may very well one day be able to know a heterosexual life if you want it desperately enough—if you pursue it with the fervor with which you annihilate—but you will always be homosexual as well. Always, Michael. Always. Until the day you die.” In this breathtaking speech, Harold delivers a critical judgment born from his careful viewing of the night’s events and his willingness to inhabit an “insider-outsider” position that allows him a more impartial, but not fully deracinated, view of the scene. He is keen to make public the shared condition of internalized homophobia that can motivate “hateful” speech like Michael’s, while deploying that exposure not to humiliate or destroy but to hold another accountable *and* to reaffirm that other’s social belonging. In reminding Michael that he will always be a homosexual, Harold counters Michael’s ambivalent desire to belong, but *not* to a category so denigrated and despised as homosexuality. In doing so, Harold is naming Michael “one of us,” reminding him that no matter what source he seeks out to define his condition—God or psychotherapist—he will always be part of the circle he has shamed.

At the moment when Harold begins this speech, Michael, in utter abjection after his failed attempt to out Alan, has literally turned away from

the scene of emotional carnage he has orchestrated. Once again, the camera refuses to allow Michael his disengaged solitude. We follow Harold's gaze as he walks across the room to confront his friend, until he stands directly beside Michael, speaking at the side of his face. Finally, in the film's most intimate shot, Harold delivers the last two lines of his speech in a tight close-up, Michael's profile silhouetted against Harold's visage. The dramatic image of Michael's profile bisecting Harold's face figuratively suggests the overlapping nature of their psyches, while also distinguishing them, since their actual profiles face different directions. This double movement of comparison and distinction, the oscillation that defines representative thinking, is underscored by the fact that the close-up highlights Harold's pockmarked cheek. This visual feature reminds us of the physical scars that *his* self-hatred have wrought. He and Michael are indeed similar, but the circumstances of the evening, which allowed Harold to step out of his insider position, have also made it possible for him to exercise his newly raised consciousness by making an informed judgment that creates distance for the sake of holding another accountable but simultaneously reasserts the continuity of gay community *amid* difference and disagreement. Hence, even in the “face” of Michael and Harold's clash, Harold's parting words are, “Call you tomorrow.” What the content of that conversation might be remains entirely open to possibility.

This chapter has sought to make two claims about *The Boys in the Band* and its continued relevance to the study of gay and feminist social formations



Harold's judgment.

in the twenty-first century. First, *The Boys in the Band's* depiction of furious collective dialogue between gay men offers one avenue for exploring the rich connections between the social and political conflicts that animated women's and gay liberation: the gay male friendship circle takes the form of a consciousness-raising group; the men's shame about their homosexuality is framed in terms of their failures to live up to traditional gender roles and beauty standards; the hateful speech that dominates the conversation echoes the personal attacks that Jo Freeman would call "trashing" within the women's movement;²⁷ and the forms of evasion and refusal to account for one's actions that each character enacts echo the forms of "resisting consciousness" that Sarachild detailed in her "Program for Feminist 'Consciousness Raising.'" These and countless other links suggest the need to develop a stronger account of the complex interaction between the social and political valences of women's and gay liberation, one attentive to the role of *culture* as a site where the political innovations of these movements were expressed in creative terms. Reading the film as a formal embodiment of feminist CR practice illuminates how cultural forms might function to transmit *and* test the conceptual limits of political forms by placing them into new and unexpected contexts and imagining a wider range of publics for their use.

Second, in an era when gay male social formations have attained unprecedented political, economic, and cultural power in the modern United States with no formal ties to feminist politics, *The Boys in the Band* remains one of the most compelling refusals of affirmative gay identity politics in twenty-first-century popular culture. Notwithstanding the undeniable continued power of homophobia and the religious right's bolstering of antigay legislation, legal victories for same-sex marriage, the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," and gay men's explosive visibility and active participation in the production of American media content have lifted this social group's status to new heights. Out of these perhaps-limited successes, urban gay male culture has jettisoned previous commitments to self-criticism grounded in a feminist political practice of consciousness-raising.

Here I speak as a participant-observer more than a scholar, taking the injunction of feminist CR practice to treat feelings as knowledge by relying on my felt experience of navigating gay male social culture. From this viewpoint, I suggest speculatively that in the wake of increasing public acceptance and accessibility to the privileges of normative American society, middle-class urban gay men have found numerous ways of courting validation from inside and outside their community, responding to decades

of homophobia with an ecstatic show of capacity: the ability to maintain beautiful bodies and exceptional creative careers and to flexibly manage the celebrated institutions of marriage, child rearing, and home ownership, *as well as* open relationships, circuit parties, and gay cruises, all the while exhibiting no anger or frustration in the face of societal homophobia. Gay men's feelings, which in the context of gay liberation and AIDS activism were valued for their ability to register the pain and violence of homophobia, are increasingly valued only if they embody the range of *positive* affects that come with demanding and achieving successful middle-class life or mastering the range of sexual liaisons and pleasures that come with having access to money, men, and travel. We may now express indignance only at the denial of civil liberties, while genuine anger or frustration directed toward other gay men for their attachment to pernicious politics and a broader culture of homophobic and racist violence can only be understood as bitterness (i.e., those who rage are simply losers who did not get their share) rather than as a productive registering of inequalities that can and should be addressed.

Perhaps the most powerful way in which such feelings have been made illegitimate is by the deeroticization of anger and rebellion among gay men: it is no longer sexy to dissent, to disagree, to demand something politically from one's interlocutors as it was at the height of gay liberation and AIDS activism, and this seems apparent in everything from the condemnation one might receive for critiquing the narrow political achievement of gay marriage to a simple disagreement of how one chooses to interpret a movie. While writing this chapter I accidentally ran into a man at a San Francisco café who had previously pursued me energetically on an online sex and dating application; when he learned I was revising a chapter on *The Boys in the Band*, he expressed his disdain for the movie's depiction of the most stereotypical aspects of gay male bitchery. Internally I bristled at this clichéd critique—and smelled the whiff of not a little internalized homophobia at his hyperbolic miming of the characters' effeminate affect. But he was cute, and I wanted to know more. I explained my sense of the movie's depiction of rebellious gay men as a powerful political claim, its consciousness-raising, and its critical camp irony as being courageous. He pointed out that camp irony was *not sexy*—it was not possible, that is, to see the men in the movie as sexually desirable because of their flamboyant excess. We concluded our conversation on a friendly note, yet this man who had consistently sought me out for two weeks online never reached out to me again during my travels. The possible reasons for this are, of course,

infinite. But questions lingered: Did associating myself with the loud, rebellious, and demanding spirit of this movie desexualize me? Had I bruised his ego by disagreeing with his interpretation of the film, and did a bruised ego mean instantaneous loss of sexual interest? Surely, chemistry alone might have dictated the outcome; but I could not shake the feeling that the contentious experience of disagreeing, even on something as simple as a movie's content, had marked me as "difficult," and hence unsexy—*difficult* in the way the men of *The Boys in the Band* are difficult, and hence dangerous. I wondered if the contemporary meaning of male homosexuality has become a "desire for the same" not only in terms of the presumed gender of one's sexual object-choice but also in terms of political values, so that gay male erotic life requires mind-numbing similitude across every scale of embodied and political life to remain secure in its sexual identity. I wondered too how substantial gay men's participation in the future of American democratic life could be, if gay male culture's litmus test for the social and political significance and legibility of any subject is how erotically desirable he is: in other words, what does it mean to extend care, investment, significance in anyone and anything you do not want to fuck? But these were lofty wonderings. I kept mulling, I met another handsome man for dinner, and then I rewatched *The Boys in the Band*.

Nearly half a century since the cinematic release of *The Boys in the Band*, it continues to provide a compelling alternative to the culture of gay male affirmation; it is, in a sense, a radically "new" narrative in the context of contemporary gay identity politics because it validates those worldviews and feeling states most commonly seen as antithetical to gay upward mobility, social advancement, and affirmation, such as negativity, bitterness, anger, depression, self-loathing, confusion, ambivalence, and frustration. In so doing, it rethinks the rhetorical framework within which critiques of affirmative gay culture and its heteronormative assumptions can only ever be read in the idiom of resentment or failure to live up to the promise of a fully assimilated gay life. The film embraces the *generative* aspects of bitterness, its ability to lay bare formerly suppressed emotions and the unfairness of gay life. It also suggests that other emotions and affective investments might be involved in a critique of gay male culture, including a demand for accountability, ethical standards of conduct, and collective care. Above all, *The Boys in the Band* demands *engagement*. It refuses to dissociate love from critique, intimacy from accountability, and collective life from fractious disagreement. It demands that we keep speaking to one another, keep turning toward each other, until our revolution is complete.

Notes

The New York Radical Women meeting poster is quoted in Carol Hanisch, "A Women's Liberation Tribute to William Hinton and the Women of Long Bow," speech delivered April 3, 1999, www.carolhanisch.org/Speeches/HintonSpeech/HintonTribSpeech.html; Gary Alinder, "My Gay Soul" (1970), in *Out of the Closets: Voices of Gay Liberation*, ed. Karla Jay and Allen Young (1972; repr., New York: NYU Press, 1992), 283.

1. Kathie Sarachild, "A Program for Feminist 'Consciousness Raising,'" in *Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation: Major Writings of the Radical Feminists*, ed. New York Radical Women (New York: Radical Feminism, 1970), 78.

2. *Ibid.*, 79.

3. Vivian Gornick, "Consciousness," in *Radical Feminism: A Documentary Reader*, ed. Barbara Crow (1971; repr., New York: NYU Press, 2000), 288.

4. Deborah Michals, "From 'Consciousness Expansion' to 'Consciousness Raising': Feminism and the Countercultural Politics of the Self," in *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and '70s*, ed. Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle (New York: Routledge, 2001), 41–68.

5. Mart Crowley, *The Boys in the Band*, 40th anniversary ed. (New York: Alyson Books, 2008), 3. All subsequent citations from the original theatrical production and the film adaptation are, respectively, from this edition of the play and from *The Boys in the Band* (1970), directed by William Friedkin (Paramount Studios, 2008), DVD.

6. Sarachild, "Program," 78–79; Karla Jay, *Tales of the Lavender Menace: A Memoir of Liberation* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 51; and Pamela Allen, "The Small Group Process," in Crow, *Radical Feminism*, 280–81.

7. Jay, *Lavender Menace*, 94–95; Dennis Altman, *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation* (1972; repr., St. Lucia, Australia: University of Queensland Press, 2012), 146–49.

8. A Gay Male Group, "Notes on Gay Male Consciousness Raising," in Jay and Young, *Out of the Closets*, 293–301.

9. Allen, "Small Group Process," 279.

10. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (1954; repr., New York: Penguin, 2006), 221.

11. Linda Zerilli, "Towards a Feminist Theory of Judgment," *Signs* 34, no. 2 (2009): 18.

12. Jay, *Lavender Menace*, 62.

13. William Scroggie, "Producing Identity: From *The Boys in the Band* to Gay Liberation," in *The Queer Sixties*, ed. Patricia Juliana Smith (London: Routledge, 1999), 238.

14. Paul Welch, "Homosexuality in America," *Life*, June 26, 1964, 66.
15. Sarachild, "Program," 78.
16. A Gay Male Group, "Notes," 293.
17. Altman, *Homosexual*, 25.
18. Sarachild, "Program," 79.
19. Allen, "Small Group Process," 278.
20. Jay, *Lavender Menace*, 52; John Knoebel, "Somewhere in the Right Direction: Testimony of My Experience in a Gay Male Living Collective," in Jay and Young, *Out of the Closets*, 314–15; June Arnold, "Consciousness-Raising," in Crow, *Radical Feminism*, 285.
21. A Gay Male Group, "Notes," 298–99. Sarachild's original "Program" listed only eleven "classic forms of resisting consciousness," by comparison to a Gay Male Group's twenty-point list (which included extensive subentries for four items). Sarachild's list tended to be general, addressing not specific behaviors but broad worldviews or habits of thought including "Anti-womanism," "False identification with the oppressor," and "Self-blame!" (79).
22. Zerilli, "Towards a Feminist Theory," 14.
23. Allen, "Small Group Process," 280–81.
24. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 237.
25. Gornick, "Consciousness," 288.
26. Zerilli, "Judgment," 20.
27. Jo Freeman, "Trashing: The Dark Side of Sisterhood," Ms., April 1976, 49–51, 92–98.