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Guy R. Davidson

University of Wollongong, guy@uow.edu.au

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Liberation, Commodity Culture and Community in "the Golden Age of Promiscuity"

Guy Davidson

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In 1977 Dennis Altman, the Australian writer, academic and gay liberation activist, returned from a month-long visit to the United States with a case of hepatitis. In "Fear and Loathing and Hepatitis," an article published in the gay literary journal *Christopher Street*, which recorded his impressions of the state of American culture and politics, and particularly the state of gay American culture and politics, Altman wrote that he "view [ed] [his] four weeks in the States with a somewhat jaundiced eye" (*Coming Out* 83). What Altman goes on to characterise as America's cultural malaise is paralleled in his own contraction of a disease characterised by lassitude, and one which moreover has a gay-specific valence: hepatitis was endemic, if not an epidemic, in urban gay male populations at the time, a fact alluded to by Altman in his statement that the disease was "seemingly rife among those sections of the country I frequented" (83). But while hepatitis can be extremely uncomfortable, it is not usually fatal, and Altman holds out no hope of recovery for the United States.

"[F]or the first time," he writes, "I find myself totally pessimistic about the American future. America has run out of energy - the intellectual, cultural, political energy that so excited me five years ago": "the excitement" and "cultural innovation" of the late sixties and early seventies "is gone" (83). (Altman was resident in the U.S. in the early 1970s and wrote a key text of the gay liberation movement, *Homosexual: Liberation and Oppression* (1971), largely inspired by his time there).

America has become decadent, Altman claims: "truly decadent, not in the sex-obsessed connotation of the word, but in its true denotation: a decline in moral and spiritual vigour" (83). However, Altman represents the decadent nature of American gay culture precisely in terms of sex obsession, asserting that "[c]omparative relaxation of the taboos against homosexuality has led to a blossoming of bars, saunas, restaurants, and theatres which hold out the promise of endless gang bangs available across the length and breadth of the country" (84). The energy of the post-Stonewall liberation movement has been sapped by a slow increase in "repressive tolerance," enabling "the emergence of a luxury-oriented, commercial gay world" (84); the promise of social transformation held out by gay liberation has been replaced by the promise of an incessant, commercialised and commodified orgy.

Altman's description of the cultural shift from the late 1960s to the late 1970s as entropic is countered in the journalist Anthony Haden-Guest's recent chronicle of 1970s New York night life, *The Last Party* (1997), in which the relation between the 1960s and the 1970s is described as a rechannelling or redirection, rather than a dissipation, of utopian vitality. Haden-Guest introduces this assertion with a quotation from "the mercurial French savant," Jean Baudrillard, musing in an interview about where "all the

energy" from May 1968 had gone: "Nowhere - certainly not into socialism, in any case. It must have been reabsorbed somewhere - without necessarily remaining underground, so as to emerge later" (xix). "Bingo!" exclaims Haden-Guest: "It did reemerge. In America, Utopian dreamers, soured by Vietnam and Watergate, became apolitical. 'Liberation' went mainstream as 'Fun'" (xix). In Haden-Guest's reading of the 1970s, the institutions of commodified leisure - discos, singles bars and sex clubs catering to not just homosexual but also straight clientele - are cast not as the opposite of revolutionary desire but as its apoliticised, sublimated expression.

Although Haden-Guest's argument is too journalistically pat to be accorded much credence, I want in what follows to take seriously the idea that utopian energies might have been focussed and constructed through the commodification of sexual "freedoms" in the urban gay male world of the 1970s. I want to approach this through an account of the tensions and connections between gay liberationist discourse, formed in the crucible of the 1960s counterculture and therefore informed by a critique of consumer capitalism, and fictional representations of the social and sexual practices made available by the expansion and relative toleration of gay male culture after Stonewall.

My account of liberationist discourse centres on the 1970s writings of Altman; I focus on him because his work is both representative of liberationist ideology and one of the most elaborated responses from a gay liberationist perspective to the changing political and cultural climate of the decade. My account of the fictional representation of the new urban gay world concentrates on Larry Kramer's 1978 novel, *Faggots*, a satirical anatomy of the New York gay ghetto. The juxtaposition of Altman and Kramer is not meant to suggest a straightforward repudiation of consumer culture on the one hand and an endorsement on the other: while Altman remains dubious about the effects of the commercial gay world, his writings are characterised by an increasing ambivalence toward this world, an increasing tendency to register its attractions and the meanings of those attractions; and far from endorsing the post-Stonewall lifestyle, Kramer's novel was, and perhaps even still is, notorious for its savage representation of the denizens and pleasures of gay Manhattan. I will argue, however, that in Kramer's novel, as well as in other examples of gay fiction from this period, the depiction of what has been named from the ironic and nostalgic perspective of post-AIDS gay culture "the golden age of promiscuity"¹ frequently gestures toward the utopian dimensions of consumption, in ways contrary to the general perspective of liberationist ideology.

From the very beginning of the post-Stonewall period, the discourse of gay liberation was in tension with the practices of the commercialised ghetto. Indeed, liberationist rhetoric tended to represent the ghetto as liberation's other, opposing the darkened interiors of bars, discos and bath houses - implicitly or explicitly identified as an extension of the closet - to the promise of visibility and militancy carried in gay liberation's investment in "the streets." In the discourse of gay activism, the supposed slogan of the Stonewall riots, "Out of the bars and into the streets," often encapsulates this view of the commercialised and secretive world of the ghetto as the benighted prelude to liberation's bright dawn (although such a reading of the slogan represses the fact that the riots *began* in a bar).² In the years after Stonewall the ghetto was identified as a hindrance to liberation's objectives or, alternatively, a focus of its transformative energies: the radical English magazine *Gay Left*, for instance, called on the movement to "help the ghetto come out" (Altman, *Coming Out* 102).

Identifying the oppression of gays and lesbians as an integral dynamic of capitalism, liberationists rejected the blandishments of the new gay lifestyle as co-optive. The expanding scene of bars, saunas and discos was criticised as exploitative and dehumanising: a deformation or betrayal of the promise of sexual liberation - although

ironically the expansion of the commercialised gay world was due at least in part to the work of gay activism. Liberationists called for an authentic gay culture and identity separate and separable from its immediate capitalist context: for a gay community premised on a holistic model of personhood - rather than narrow, "genital" understandings of sexual identity - and on uncommodified forms of interaction and cultural activity.

For example, in 1976 the collective running the American liberationist newspaper, *Fag Rag*, published a "Second Five-Year plan of struggle" designed to "keep "alive the spirit of '69," in which they repudiated the "boring and pacified ghetto" (485), and celebrated a noncommercialised gay culture comprising a diverse range of activities - such as "essays, music ... kissing, loving ... meetings, learning, teaching sewing" - which, they declared, "we will not sell ... to the highest advertising market to be packaged and pacified" (486).

Metaphors of pacification and "colonialization" also structure a 1977 attack on the bar scene by the lesbian activist Felice Newman entitled "Why I'm Not Dancing." Asserting that "The bars are not a gay community, but a substitute for a gay community" (140), Newman identifies the bar scene as "dangerous" in its replication of heterosexual capitalist culture: "[O]ur communities must be consciously created, not adapted from a sexist mould," Newman argues (145). Asserting that "our sexuality is not a pretty coat worn on the surface of the body" and that "our importance to one another cannot be measured in a commodity market," she ends her essay by looking forward to a moment when the achievement of alternative "communal goals" "challenge[s] and delight[s] us" (145). At this future utopian moment, "our bodily expression" will be "more than an energy release or a sexual ritual"; "then," Newman declares, "we will really dance" (145).

In his 1971 book, *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation*, Dennis Altman also deploys different modes of dancing to indicate the distance between the ghetto and liberation. The "atmosphere" at dances run by gay lib organisations, Altman writes, is not "that of pure sex barter" as is the case in what he calls the "commercial dance bars" of the "traditional gay world" (120). Instead gay lib dances "strive quite consciously to break down [the] alienation" supposedly engendered by the commercial scene with terpsichorean innovations like "the circle dance which promotes a new feeling of community" (121). Elsewhere in this book, Altman suggests that community is prompted and concretized through activities sponsored or sanctioned by the gay movement such as "meetings," "rap sessions" and - predictably - time spent "on the streets" (138). Altman quotes from an article he wrote shortly after coming to New York in the early 1970s, in which he describes his political awakening as involving a rejection of the commercial gay scene in favour of such activities: "In six weeks," he testifies, "I have been only once to a gay bar, and that was with someone I loved for a time" (138). As a consequence of this reconfiguration of gay being, Altman writes, "[t]he gay community in New York has become for me just that; I walk through the Village and I see people whom I know, even if only by sight, and I feel I belong" (138).

"Ultimately all liberation movements reveal a yearning for some sort of 'gemeinschaft,' a search for community," Altman later writes in an essay of 1974, "The Homosexual and the Family" (*Coming Out* 53), in which he iterates the liberationist goal of "a new concept of community - one based on, but not restricted to, a common sexuality" (52) and the liberationist complaint "that the homosexual world, as we now know it, is a pseudo-community in that it does not involve the 'reciprocity of awareness' that Robert Paul Wolff sees as distinguishing a community" (52). But the face-to-face "reciprocity of awareness" suggested in Altman's earlier image of his walks through the Village

indicates that the liberationist distinction between utopian hopes and commodified lifestyle is not perhaps so easily made: the site of Altman's partial or nascent *Gemeinschaft* is also the centre of the gay commercial scene; the ideal of "community" is superimposed over but also imbricated with the fact of "the ghetto." Liberation ideology's dichotomy of "the streets" and the interiors of "the ghetto" is untenable; if, as I've mentioned, the increase of commercial venues in the 1970s was in part the result of gay activism, then conversely the visible gay presence on the streets celebrated by liberationism was importantly generated by the existence of those venues: the experience of "the streets" is in fact part of what constitutes the cultural phenomenon of the ghetto.³

In "The Homosexual and the Family," Altman goes on to warn against the regressive potential of the ideal of *Gemeinschaft*:

Those who talk nostalgically of communal agricultural societies - and this nostalgia creeps quite frequently into contemporary radical thought - forget that such societies necessarily imposed more rigid restrictions and roles than our own atomistic one. There is, I think, a great danger in replacing the nuclear with communal families, in that this could very easily merely change, rather than remove, restrictions on human development. (53)

The relation of "atomistic" consumer capitalism to sexual diversity is certainly not lost on Altman, a follower of Marcuse and other Freudian radicals. In his 1970s work, Altman holds that the move to a commodity culture has made available a liberation of the libido from the imperative of heterosexual reproduction, an imperative seen as intimately tied to the productivist demands of the modern industrial state. But this point remains something of a side-light in Altman's '70s writings - the quotation I've given from "The Homosexual and the Family" about the liberating aspects of atomization, for instance, is symptomatically given in a long parenthetical insertion and thus positioned as ancillary to his main argument about community. Altman remains insistent that there is a necessary link between capitalism and the oppression of homosexuality. He resists the notion, which is carried in his own argument and which has recently been elaborated by a number of theorists, that the multiplicity of sexual desire in modern capitalist society is, in part at least, actively produced by the demands of a constantly expanding and facturing market economy. According to this view, the tolerance of homosexuality is not co-option but rather the logical extension of a system which, as Karen Hurley puts it, "has no investment in normalizing desire, only in identifying and exploiting the new markets that the multiplication of desiring economies produces" (Hurley 169).

By the late 1970s, however - by the time, that is, of his jaundiced report on America - Altman exhibits less certainty regarding his analysis of gay sexuality and, collaterally, a less straightforwardly condemnatory view of the ghetto. In that article, for instance, Altman concedes both that "the links" "between our oppression and the dominant socio-political order" may be "more tenuous" than was previously thought, and that "[t]o go to one's first gay bar" may now be "for some the same act of self-liberation that going to a gay liberation meeting was for many of us" (86). Altman's discussion of a Parisian gay sauna in "Three Views of France," another article from 1977, first published in Canada's *Body Politic*, enacts a conflict between, on the one hand, a desire for a politically pure gayness, separable from the context of consumption, and, on the other hand, a registration of the entanglement of sexuality with the commodity form.

The article, which Altman himself announces as a description of his "strange ambivalence towards baths," (96) is notable for the tentativeness and waywardness of its argument. Altman questions "liberationist ideology's condemnation of the baths'

"anonymity and ... body objectification" but cannot himself arrive at a definitive alternative reading of the behaviour at the baths (96-7). A collocation of unanswered questions and self-contradictions inscribe the baths as a site of incoherence or aporias: "why is it worse to meet people via sex than via a church social? Is it degrading or liberating to see men behaving like rutting animals - and is this indeed an appropriate description?" (97).

The baths, according to Altman, present "both pure eroticism and impersonal alienation" (96). Both the purity and the impersonality of the baths experience is linked to the lack of "pretence" in this venue where men simply "go to ... fuck" (96). But the lack of pretence which promotes depersonalisation, and which enables a view of the baths' patrons as "rutting animals," also makes possible what Altman refers to as the baths' "marvellous equality": "once one's paid and put on the regulation towel and robe all the world becomes the same" (96). The baths here are imagined as a site of utopian ("marvellous") democracy produced through an act of consumption; significantly, Altman describes the baths as "protected from reality" (96), figuratively bolstering the intimation that the baths are a "no-place." Such utopian intimations are repudiated in Altman's closing remarks on these particular baths, however. Located, writes Altman, at "the very heart of the ghetto," these baths' "cost as well as their reputation ensures that their clientele is firmly middle class" (97). Then, in a curious *non sequitur*, he continues: "It is a fair bet that even with France moving markedly to the left the saunas remain strongholds of supports for the right" (97). Altman registers and then retreats from the utopian potential of the baths, ultimately distancing them from any politically progressive tendency.⁴

My point is not, of course, that gay lifestyle practices such as the commodified sex available at the baths function straightforwardly as utopian but rather that they contain or suggest utopian potential, as Altman initially admits, and that they thereby signal the intimacy of certain practices of consumption with ideas about gay community, in which inequalities of class and race are supposedly eclipsed through the formation of a brotherhood based on sexual orientation. I want now to turn to Larry Kramer's *Faggots* in order to more closely explicate and elaborate upon this assertion. *Faggots* presents the New York gay ghetto of the 1970s as a domain in which commodity culture's characteristics of proliferation, superabundance, fetishism and spectacle obtain in intensified form; and while it certainly turns this perspective on the ghetto to critical ends, various figurative and descriptive tendencies in the text also work to undermine its satirical project. For this reason, I suggest, we can think of the novel as making more pronounced and more extended the connection between consumption and community which Altman hints at.

The book opens with a page-long district by district statistical analysis of the number of "faggots" living in the New York city area (there are, we are told, in total 2,556,596), a passage which sets the tone for the subsequent narrative's rendition of the gay ghetto in terms of standardisation, seriality and statistics. Both the narrator and the characters are given to compulsive listing, enumeration, quantification and tabulation. The central character, Fred Lemish, speaks of "approximately seventy-two places" in New York "where I can engage in physical activity leading to orgasm" (51); guests at an orgy are catalogued by occupation (five attorneys, one garbage collector, two firemen [141]); experiences at the baths are parsed - attractive customers achieve "approximately three to six orgasms" a night versus "approximately forty-nine rejections" for the unattractive (174). The book emphasises the gay slang term "number," meaning a sexually desirable man; one young character experiences epiphanic self-recognition when he is told that this is what he is: "I want to be a Number! I want to be a Number!" (59). Gay desire itself is represented as "statistical," exemplifying Deleuze and Guattari's argument that

under contemporary capitalism, "There is always something statistical in our loves, and something belonging to the laws of large numbers" (294). The novel's logic is one of proliferation: announcements of the multiple openings of discos are a recurrent motif; the initial estimate of the number of faggots in the New York city area is twice updated, twice increased, at later points in the narrative (223; 282), as if in accelerated exemplification of John D'Emilio's argument that capitalism provides the conditions for both the production and the increase of homosexual people ("Capitalism and Gay Identity").

Faggots identifies the gay world as simulacral through the deployment of tropes of oneirism, hallucination and make-believe: inhabitants of the ghetto possess "narcotic beauty" (289; 382); one character enthusiastically declares at one of the many spectacular parties which punctuate the narrative that being gay is like "living in a movie" (324); the ghetto is identified by another character as a place of "the fantastic" rather than "the real" - a state accessed through the somatic intensities of "disco, drug and fuck" (171). One of the main characters is Winnie Heinz, the idolised model for Winston cigarettes, whose image, the narrator tells us, is consumed by men and women in the act of literally consuming or inhaling the cigarettes he sells. Winnie's iconicity, his status as spectacular object of desire, is, however, eminently dispensable, subject to fashion's laws of interchangeability and replacement; after he falls to his death during a show at a disco which literalises his cynosural status, a new Winston model is instantly chosen from the crowd by the advertising executive in charge of the account. While these features of the text's rendition of the ghetto I've just described do obvious satirical work, the digressive and vivid description through which the commodification of the gay world is conveyed also indicates a fascination with that commodification: a kind of demonstration at the formal level of the "passion for the code" which Baudrillard argues directs consumer society.

The book's critique is perhaps less ambivalent and more devastating in those moments when its account of the pleasures of the New York gay world as a continuously unfolding panorama of the new and the different shifts into an identification of those pleasures as in fact a numbing, automatous consumption of the same: when the eternal novelty of consumer culture is recast as repetition, as in the episode in which the supposedly unique "beauty" of Winnie is speedily replaced with an equally beautiful face. The standardisation of the gay male body, which Altman, in his account of the towel-clad sameness enforced by the baths, associated with the promise of "marvellous equality," is in *Faggots* critiqued in an account of the clone and the superficial eroticism he engenders. Sexual desire is mediated or constructed by the commodity: "why was the same guy Hot and fuckable in a Pendleton and not a Polo? And why did black boots on Christopher Street lure more fellows than brown?" (45).

Yet even these descriptions of the clone are notable for their fascinated tone. Lemish, walking through the Village, eulogises "the Streets" and its passing parade of identical men: "The Streets: Christopher Washington Greenwich Hudson West and Sheridan Square, such a parade, everyone dressed alike" (82). The inability of *Faggots* to imagine a credible alternative to the ghetto points to the fundamental role of the commodity in the construction of contemporary urban gay male identity; something also suggested in this particular passage in the collapsing of the ghetto and "the Streets," posited as opposites in liberation ideology. Admittedly this description is given from Lemish's point of view; yet the novel offers nothing in the way of a compelling alternative perspective. The lack of "love," of human connection, is invoked in the book, especially with regard to Lemish, the hapless hero constantly betrayed by the men in whom he romantically invests; and Kramer has said that his polemical intention was to point up this perceived lack of love in the gay world. But the book offers no concretisation of love. Instead the characters seem unable to extricate themselves from the ghetto and its

endless round of empty pleasures. On the last page, the book's final numerical milestone is reached - Fred's fortieth birthday - and the event is marked by no significant change of life but merely by the opening of a further two discos.

The anguished cry of another character, Josie, toward the end of the narrative encapsulates the text's attitude toward the gay ghetto: 'Summer after summer. Another repetition of a repetition. ... All the same thing ... Do I have the courage to leave it? To do what? So much energy? Why leave it? Why stay? So much. Toward what end?' (375). The anxious shuttling here between identification and disidentification - between an attraction to the "energy" of the gay world and a condemnation of that world as a repetitive process without an "end" - reflexively and synechdochially presents the text's own representational tendencies. Like the unanswered questions in Altman's description of the baths, Josie's near-incoherent series of interrogatives function as rhetorical questions, if we understand the rhetorical question not as one which implies its own answer but - as the *OED* also defines the term - as a question deployed to "produce an effect rather than ... gain information"; the "effect" for both Altman's and Kramer's text is of an overriding ambivalence concerning the commodification of gayness.

How then does the book's representation work, as I've suggested it does, to identify the utopian rather than the merely alluring (and potentially deleterious) aspects of the gay lifestyle? It does this, I want to argue, primarily through its representations of disco, the experience on the dancefloor. In this, it has affinities with several other gay fictions of its period. In Andrew Holleran's *The Dancer from the Dance* (also from 1978), the disco is designated an "anarchic," classless democracy of "erotic love" (33), as illustrated by a tableau in which a "boy passed out on the sofa from an overdose of Tuinols [is] a Puerto Rican who washed dishes in the employees' cafeteria at CBS, but the doctor bending over him [has] treated presidents" (32-3). If what Holleran calls this "strange democracy" of the gay lifestyle is in part at least limited by the requirement of "physical beauty" (32), descriptions of the dancefloor experience in *Faggots* and elsewhere suggest a more thoroughgoing, if elusive, transformative and liberatory potential. In *Faggots*, Lemish at one point moves though "one massive cake of solid body ... so many bodies becoming One" (372), an image of unity through self-emptying which picks up on and extends the image of democracy carried in Holleran's descriptions of the disco.

In another late 1970s gay fiction, Felice Picano's *The Lure* (1978), the dancefloor at a vast, opulent disco is represented as inducing a derangement of knowable forms and identities. For the protagonist, "it seemed as though every inch of the place was crowded with bodies, and every body was in twitching, jumping, swirling, almost Brownian motion ... stroboscopic lights utterly destroyed the shape, solidity, essence of every object he looked at. ... Everything mov[ed] so quickly, then shift[ed] rapidly to another shape, another density, another brightness" (382). It is more than a coincidence, I want to suggest here, that metaphors of Brownian motion, fragmentation and desolidification are also used by William Leiss, a commentator on consumer culture, to describe the infinitely divisible and cognitively unstable nature of desires and their objects under the dispensation of consumer capitalism (Leiss 88-89, 93). For in the experience of the dancefloor, gay fiction suggests, the fragmentation and regrouping involved in the construction of alternative sexual identities is, in part, played out, and it is played out *through* the commodified pleasure castigated as alienating by the gay liberationists.

As Gregory Bredbeck argues, '70s disco was "the convenient occasion to choreograph a very complicated number called gay identity" (101) - an identity never monolithic or "essential" but processual and "radically contingent on both historical and localized configurations" (95): inflected - indeed often riven - by differences of race, class,

gender and geographical and temporal setting. Bredbeck suggests that gay disco's status as a site of subcultural generation indicates the ways in which "the sustained performance of interpellation [by the gay subculture] enables the reproduction across time of a dynamic that can create the illusion of a centralized and totalized identificational process while, in reality, never allowing either the centralization or totalization of identity" (95). Or, as one of Kramer's characters remarks of his disco experience, "I am dancing with my own true self" (375): at once a wholeness and a splitting, at once an experience of individuality and commonality, this character's disco experience points to the complexity and provisionality of gay identity and community.

According to Walter Benjamin, the transitoriness of fashion in consumer culture inverts the promise of social and personal change embodied in utopian politics: "The living, human capacity for change and infinite variation becomes alienated, and is affirmed only as a quality of the inorganic object" (Buck-Morss 99). But what if the processes of fashion and commodity consumption are deployed in the creation of identities which resist hegemonic sexual norms? In his discussion of clones, the narrator of *Faggots* wonders "if clothes make the man what were they making?" (45). Although the answer in *Faggots* is a largely negative one, evidence from elsewhere in this text and from elsewhere in the practices and representations of urban gay subcultures indicates that such making through consumption importantly contributes to and underwrites the utopian notion of gay community.

Guy Davidson, *English Studies Program, University of Wollongong, New South Wales, Australia.*

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Footnotes

¹ Cf Brad Gooch, *The Golden Age of Promiscuity* (1996), a novel about the 1970s New York ghetto which ends with the "chill[ing]" (301) appearance on the scene of Gaetan Dugas, "Patient Zero" in *And the Band Played On* (1987), Randy Shilts's contentious account of the arrival of AIDS in the United States.

² In an essay on representations of gay disco which converges at several points with mine and which, also like this paper, provides readings of Kramer's *Faggots* and Andrew Holleran's *Dancer from the Dance*, Gregory Bredbeck reads the slogan as indicating the ghetto's *foundational* importance for a gay liberationist politics: "the representation of the gay disco in the seventies reveals it to be precisely the bars that construct the subject of gay liberation" ("Troping the Light Fantastic," 84).

³ For a detailed historical account of the conditions enabling the burgeoning of the commercial gay scene in 1970s urban America, see the essays collected in John D'Emilio, *Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University*.

⁴ This is not where Altman ends his analysis of these matters, however. In his 1982 book, *The Homosexualization of America, the Americanization of the Homosexual*, for instance, Altman further extends and qualifies his analysis of the complex relations between sexual "freedoms," the politicisation of gay identity, and consumer capitalism; see especially Chapter 3, "Sex and the Triumph of Consumer Capitalism." For a more recent exploration of related topics, see his [Global Sex](#).

In *Australian Humanities Review*, see also:

- [Guy Davidson's review of James Donald's *Imagining the Modern City*](#);
- and Dennis Altman's ["Sex and Political Economy", an excerpt from *Global Sex*](#) and ["On Global Queering"](#).

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