

Queer Distortion: Analyzing The Effects of Greer Lankton's "Lonely Dolls" During The AIDS Epidemic

Ray Collins & Dr. Stephanie Peebles-Tavera

College of Arts & Sciences

ABSTRACT

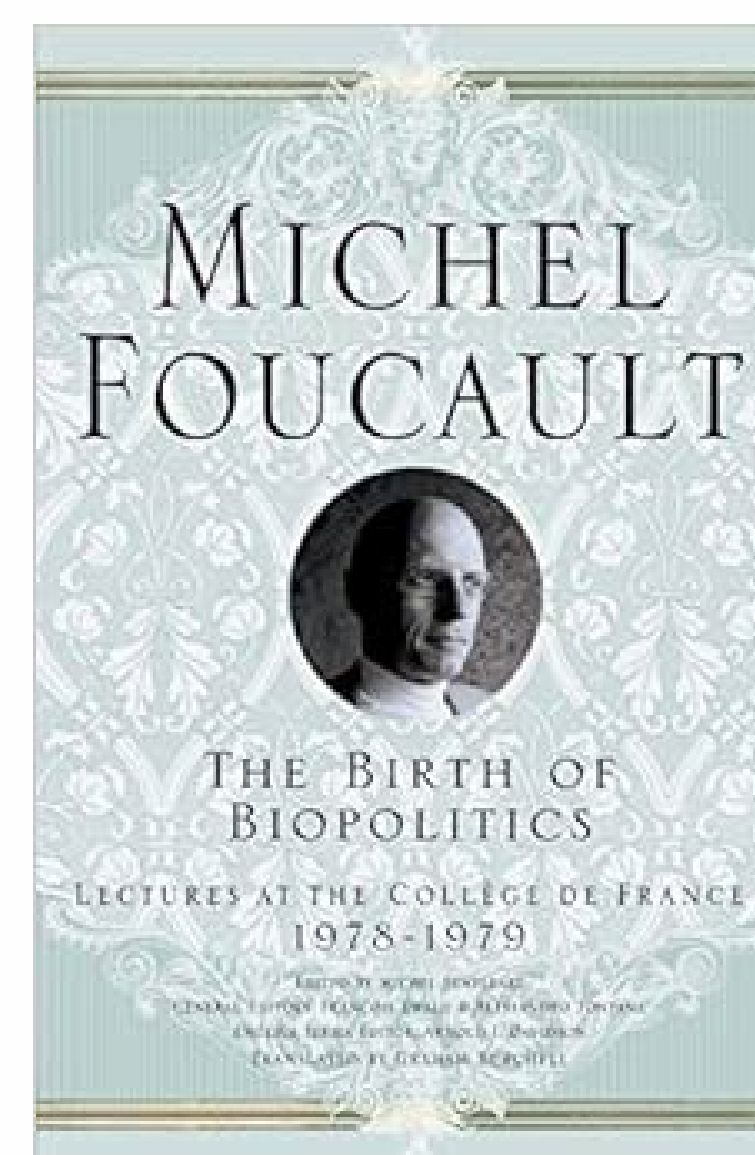
Greer Lankton (1958 - 1996) was a trans artist in the New York LGBTQ+ art scene during the 1980's AIDS epidemic. She created *Doll Party*, satirizing media discourse of gender, sexuality, and disability. Lankton serves as the key figure in my research because her unique use of horror elements led to greater opportunity for misrepresentation. The question leading this study asks: **Did Greer Lankton's *Doll Party* contribute to or resist the generative stigma of AIDS in the 1980s?** This research aims to redefine socio-medico-legal disparities caused or reaffirmed by popular media that affect quality of life for LGBTQ+ minorities, as Identifying the spread of stigmatic narratives is crucial to expanding upon social / medical equity.

INTRODUCTION

In 1981, the CDC reported the first documented AIDS carriers, diagnosed with an unusual type of pneumonia & Kaposi's sarcoma. The media referred to the illness as "gay cancer," leading to the public's assumption that only gay men could be afflicted. This continued in 1982 when the CDC coined the term "AIDS"—or Acquired Immunodeficient Syndrome—which stemmed from HIV, a sexually transmitted virus. The public assumed the spread of AIDS was a result of queer promiscuity and grew paranoid of queer-folk. This paranoia bubble popped in 1983 when the first reported cases of AIDS in women and children were published by the CDC. This thrust America into a nationwide panic, which increased tenfold in 1984 when the *NYTimes* wrongly reported that AIDS could be contracted through saliva, causing medical professions to refuse resuscitation to AIDS carriers.

METHODS

- This study adopts a medical humanities and queer / trans studies approach for historical outbreak narratives and deconstructs the visual rhetoric of Greer Lankton's *Hospital Visit* and *Lonely Dolls* exhibit to examine how our culture and society treat queer people as ill.
- This research employs a biopolitical content analysis of cultural artifacts, and specifically, sculptures by Lankton, an approach that seeks to break down the narratives Lankton (sub)consciously deploys in her own work for greater or lesser stigmatization.
- Both narratives evolved from Michel Foucault's work on biopolitics, the control of populations (e.g. queer, disabled) using systems of power (e.g. medical, government, etc.).



RESULTS



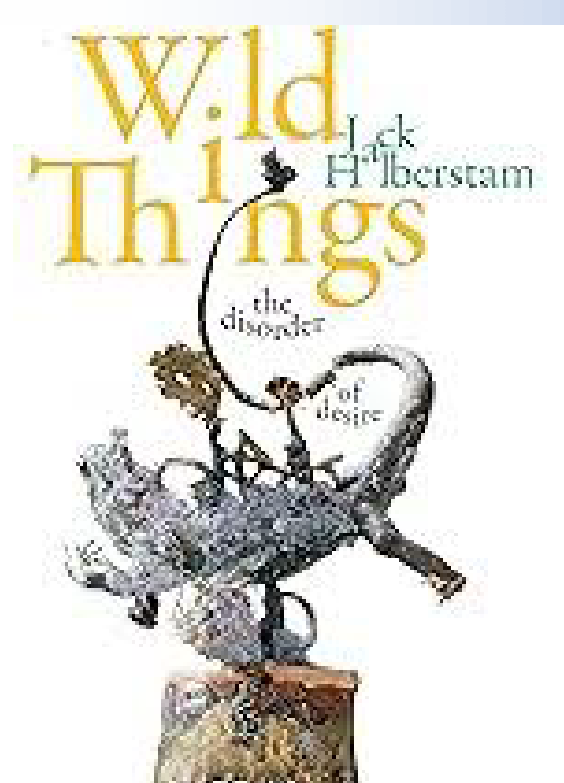
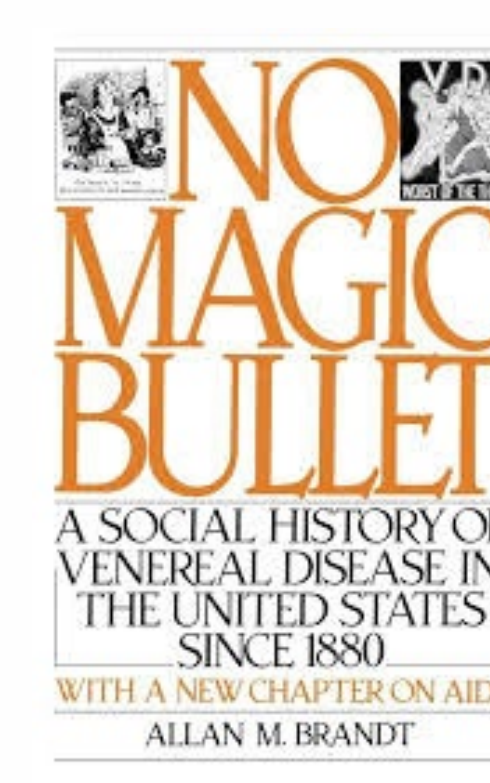
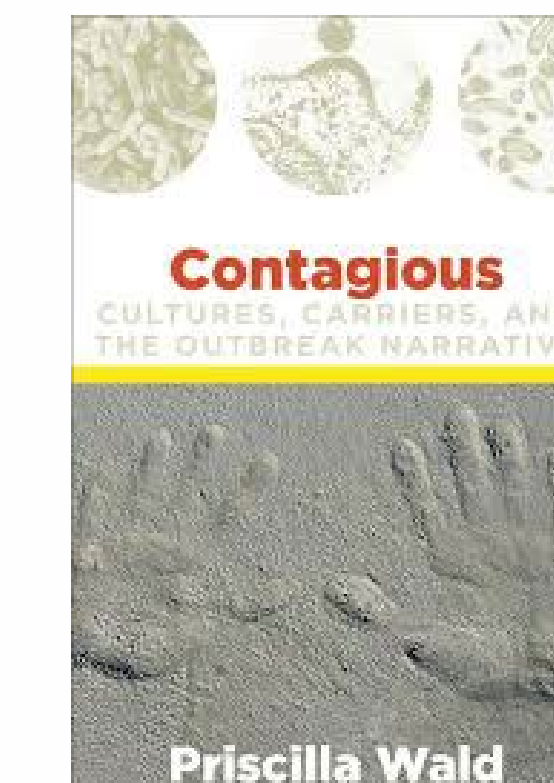
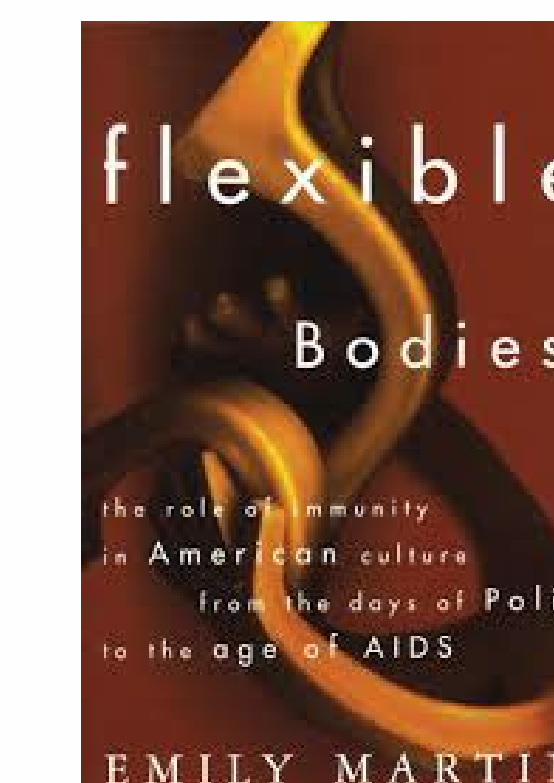
"Hospital Visit" represents the acute distrust AIDS carriers held towards hospitalization. Lady Demoral satirizes the cliché view of female AIDS carriers—as promiscuous women who (morally and sexually) lack self-control. Doctor Divine employs the horror of the medical professionals who purposely neglected or mistreated AIDS.



"Hermaphrodite" is a conscious critique of stigmatic cisnormative depictions of the trans community as repulsive. The doll's focus on its genitalia is a direct parallel to the stigma placed on queer people, who are labeled "sexually corrupt". Lankton's use of birth in this piece represents the feminization of disease (and its carriers), implying the doll's babies are the result of "breeding AIDS."

LITERATURE REVIEW

- Martin** and **Wald** probe the cultural narrative of immunity as a war against one's enemy. This is a narrative created by media, education, and medicine to control our perception of people with illnesses.
- Brandt** and **Halberstam** highlight pathologic narratives, past and present, to identify the systemic oppression of virus carriers based off of pathological fear.
- Halberstam** identifies toxic masculinity as a major oppressor in cisnormative culture, supporting traditional roles of masculinity and femininity as a cause of oppression during the AIDS epidemic.
- Hayward**, **Hammer**, and **Malatino** aspire to dissolve the cultural stigma on trans people and women alike, encouraging acceptance of queer & feminine grotesqueness as a part of nature.



CONCLUSIONS

Lankton's creations incorporate an untamed essence to them, displaying profane imagery laced with pleasure and pain. Her work attempted to normalize both queer & feminine grotesqueness, each piece embracing sexuality and lesser found masculinities. The demonization of LGBTQ persons—and distortion of queer media to perpetuate stigma—are not only crucial for neo-fascist control; they deteriorate trust amongst Americans using extremist rhetoric to target marginalized—LGBTQ+, trans, and POC—groups in American society, which continues into present-day narratives. **There is a need to apply these narratives in modern contexts**, for researchers to reassess and prevent further deterioration of American trust.

REFERENCES



Please download this QR code for full access to all references used in this presentation

If you experience any issues accessing the PDF linked to this QR code, do not hesitate to contact me at rkcollins023@gmail.com