CHAPTER FOUR

The Perfect Moment: Gays, Christians, and the National Endowment for the Arts

I want them to know they don’t have to be gay.
—Michael Cooney, “Set Free” Ministry

Beginning in 1989 and continuing through the early 1990s, a public controversy took place over the funding practices of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Christian conservatives attacked the NEA for funding the creation and exhibition of artworks by gay and feminist artists, works that they deemed obscene. Arts, gay/lesbian, and civil liberties organizations all joined the battle in defense of the NEA. At various points in the controversy Congress imposed content restrictions on NEA funding, but the most significant outcome of the battle has been a dramatic reduction in the funds allocated to the NEA.

I did ethnographic research on this controversy. The form of this research differed in many ways from the work I did on Theatre Rhinoceros. While, as in the Rhino study, I conducted interviews and sat in on meetings, for the NEA study the interviews and meetings took place all over the country, and more importantly, a significant part of my research involved collecting an extraordinary amount of paper. In the offices of arts and civil liberties activists in San Francisco, New York, and Washington, I not only interviewed executive directors and public policy directors, but I also copied file drawers full of faxed “calls for action”; the direct mail of both sides; press releases; “talking points”; newspaper and magazine articles (usually partisan opinion pieces) written by, published by, or merely collected by the file keeper; drafts of legislation; legal briefs;
handwritten notes from phone calls and meetings; lobbyists’ letters to
Congress; and “dear colleague” letters written by anti-NEA Congress
members. All the while, I was building my own file full of newspaper and
magazine clippings, transcripts of talk radio shows, direct mail solicita-
tions, and notes from meetings.

This controversy was grist for a huge organizational and information-
technology mill; it involved relatively little (but not none) of the face-
to-face communication that is so frequently taken to indicate the exis-
tence of community. And yet the discourse of community ran rampant
through it: those attacking the NEA’s funding practices spoke of the re-
ligious community that was offended by the NEA’s funding of artworks
by members of the homosexual community, which, they said, was trying
to gain an unwarranted legitimacy vis-à-vis the American nation, the
communal nature of which was thought to be threatened by homo-
sexual legitimacy; those supporting the NEA’s funding of gay expression
spoke of attacks on the gay community and of the artists’ constructive
role within their communities and the national community.

I was initially drawn to explore this controversy because, at the time,
it was the main site for a mutual obsession of gays with Christians and
Christians with gays. Although, from the perspective of Washington bu-
reaucrats and arts administrators, it was the budgets of arts organiza-
tions that were most at risk and it was arts organizations that were most
active (along with a variety of religious right organizations) in lobbying
in Washington, outside the Beltway, these events served to focus the at-
tention of gays on Christians and Christians on gays.

Gay/lesbian, arts, and civil liberties organizations all responded to
the attacks on the NEA launched by conservative Christians. However,
their roles in the battle were quite different. The arts industry responded
by working on congressional authorization and appropriations legisla-
tion pertaining to the NEA. Gays and lesbians and those arts organiza-
tions representing individual artists (which tended to have a significant
gay constituency) felt that the arts lobby was willing to compromise in
the wrong places, allowing restrictions on content in order to save dol-
ars, in effect sacrificing gay and lesbian expression. No one in the arts
community was willing to admit to such a sacrifice, although, as arts
advocates acknowledged, many in the arts world were slow to see the at-
tack on gay artwork as “my issue.” Civil liberties groups and, in particu-
lar, People for the American Way, worked with the arts groups in Wash-
ington and helped to mount a national public relations campaign for arts funding; they framed the attack on the NEA as an attack on free speech and thus on American values. Gays and lesbians, by contrast, were peripheral to the legislative process; their response took place in gay newspapers, on gay stages, and in a shift in self-understanding that would produce a campaign entitled “Fight the Right” by an organization originally formed to fight for rights, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF). Of course, the Fight the Right campaign, primarily a tool used in relation to antigay rights ballot initiatives, was a campaign for rights. But in this campaign the enemy was not framed as a homophobic society at large. Instead, it was a specific right-wing religious community.

The NGLTF’s Fight the Right Action Kit is a compilation of articles, essays, speeches, resource lists, and instructional materials on how to organize, build coalitions, and “talk the talk.” It begins by introducing the reader to what is variously called the “New Right,” the “Christian Right,” and the “Far Right.” A historical article locates the birth of the movement in a mobilization of conservative Christians by right-wing political strategists in the 1970s and 1980s (Mozzochi et al., “New Right”). While this cynical treatment of the Christian right as a political construction denies them authenticity as an organic community, the article also constructs them as a community by describing particular cultural and historical parameters and origins: blue collar, southern white, Christian, reaction against the civil rights movements. The article is likewise ambivalent about the claims of the movement to being “of the people,” suggesting on the one hand that its populist and democratic claims are false, but on the other that it is the product of a mass mobilization, and thus has a large and powerful, if hoodwinked and manipulated, constituency; the Christian right is not then the “true minority” it claims to be, even while simultaneously claiming to be the moral majority and naming its opposition as “radical extremists.” According to NGLTF, the Christian right is somehow both large and marginal, popular but not populist.

The newspapers, newsletters, and direct mail of organizations affiliated with both gays and Christians were filled with articles tracking the activities and “agenda” of the other. Quite a number of articles in gay journals cast their essays on the Christian right as “undercover reports,” as revealing an otherwise inaccessible and dangerous other. The ruses and costumes undertaken to do these stories, described in some detail and displayed in photographs, seemed intended both to give the reporter
entrée, as “one of them,” to an otherwise closed and conspiratorial world, and to protect the reporter, as if her person would be in danger were she discovered. Likewise, many of the Christian reports on gays claim to be uncovering a secret world, spied on covertly, as if video footage of that most public of events, the gay pride parade, were footage of a cell meeting obtained by a hidden camera. Such reports were frequently structured in a myth versus fact format intended to debunk the supposed lies perpetrated by gay people that might lead one to think gay existence was benign rather than the threat to society and to salvation that it truly is. In these articles, the authoritative testimony of the expert is generally accompanied by the personal testimony of an individual who has given up that degrading lifestyle in favor of Christ, marriage, and children. In my own research process, I produced a notable number of testimonials to conversion in the opposite direction, from Christian to gay. These conversion narratives suggest the mutual incompatibility, if symmetry, of gayness and Christianity.

The direct mail solicitations of the American Family Association (AFA), the Christian organization that initiated the attack on the NEA, describe the “anti-Christian bigotry” funded by the NEA, the “forced taxpayer funding of prohomosexual, anti-Christian pornography.” These pieces often incorporated gay-themed or authored “anti-Christian” art—and there was for a while a great deal of art produced that targeted antigay figures such as Jesse Helms—consuming and reproducing the configuration of gays and Christians as symmetrically opposed communities.

The gay versus Christian battle, which certainly began before the NEA controversy—with arguments over AIDS being predominant in the 1980s—escalated after the arts controversy to include explicit battles over civil rights: in several states and many more municipalities initiatives have been placed on the ballot by the religious right that aim to overturn existing and outlaw additional gay rights ordinances. Huge nationally monitored campaigns have been waged over these initiatives, in a sense referendums on gay citizenship, gay subjection. These campaigns have been accompanied by relatively high levels of antigay violence.

It has seemed to me that the obsession of gays with Christians is counterproductive politically: we feed their organizing efforts by attacking them and fail to intervene in the larger social processes that generate homophobia. In this chapter, I deconstruct the gay/Christian opposition
by reading the arts controversy as a renegotiation of the roles and relations between community, nation, and state in the context of the emerging discourse of globalization. In analyzing globalization as a discourse rather than an empirical fact, I treat it as a process of articulating social formations at a moment of economic and political crisis and transformation. The discourse of globalization suggests that nation-states are no longer the optimal units of economic activity and that in fact they have lost their power to control the global flow of capital. It suggests that nonnational communities are emerging as more appropriate sites for production and consumption, while control over capital flows has shifted to international trade organizations and to the global market itself. The NEA controversy engaged this discourse, generating new communal economic sites and dismantling the nation-state by separating nation from state, but it also enacted a certain resistance to globalization, marking the costs and benefits of particular transformations for various constituencies.

All of the activism, for and against the NEA, other than that of the government itself and the for-profit media, was undertaken by nonprofits—some newly formed for this purpose, many already in existence—most organized as 501c3 charitable, educational organizations, a few as 501c4 lobbying groups. (Organizations operating under one name are often actually a pair of organizations: People for the American Way [PFAW] and PFAW Action Fund, for instance, are the 501c3 and 501c4 counterparts of each other.) These organizations operate through an array of common techniques for raising funds, mobilizing grassroots support, and engaging in direct lobbying. One of the most prevalent techniques in this battle was direct mail (or fax or phone) campaigns, one of the more potent forms of niche marketing, aimed at carefully selected potential constituents/consumers, employing rhetorics of community—gay, religious, arts, and American community—to realize those constituents.

The NEA, founded in the 1960s, precisely the moment of an extraordinary explosion in the number of nonprofits (Hall, “Inventing the Nonprofit Sector”; Weisbrod, Nonprofit Economy) and of a very high level of social strife in the United States, is itself a mechanism for generating and supporting nonprofits. With the exception of relatively minor individual fellowship programs, at the time of the controversy, the NEA funded only formally incorporated nonprofit organizations. These organizations were
usually members of local or state field specific arts service organizations, and these local and state service organizations were generally members of national service organizations, which were again field specific, the artistic fields matching precisely the funding categories of the NEA. Artists and arts organizations around the country were thus tied through the hierarchy of organizations to the national state. The NEA controversy reanimated these hierarchies of organizations and developed new ones.

As I argued in the previous chapter, participation in nonprofit organizations serves to articulate liberal political and economic subjects. And the inscription of arts activism in nonprofits did produce all participants in this battle as analogous subjects of capitalism and the liberal nation-state. However, the various participants also took up substantively different positions, elaborating quite distinct subjectivities. The direct mail of Christian organizations addresses a very different subject than that of civil liberties groups. The Christian letters are highly personalized; “Beverly” [LaHaye] or “Don” [Wildmon] write to say: “Today I’m asking you to help.” Their letters include stories of their personal or organizational trials and tribulations and of personal experiences that illustrate some principle of righteous living. In other words, these are witnessing letters, from one situated, gendered, familial subject to another.

The direct mail of PFAW is very different in style and substance from that of the Christian organizations. For one thing, their letters are very, very long (four to six pages), single-spaced as-if-typed documents explaining the details of the legislative process and rehearsing a large number of issues or aspects of an issue. The PFAW letters do not come from an individual with any personal characteristics but from the president, speaking for the organization (“We’ve told you who we are—and what we stand for”) or they come from a famous person who has allowed his name to be used but has not managed to inject any personality into the text itself. To give the text authority, a copy of an article in the New York Times will sometimes be included in the package. One abstract rational mind addresses another, who will respond because he has been persuaded: “Now, it’s time for you to act.” The urgent actions to be taken—write to your congressional representative; send money to PFAW—are overwhelmed with information.

Enacting their opposition in a battle over national arts funding, these differently articulated subjects articulated very different notions of the
proper boundaries and functions of the nation-state. Gays, arts organizations, and civil libertarians imagined the state as the neutral site of rights and as the active promoter of Enlightened secular culture; Christians meanwhile articulated the nation as a particular cultural and political entity, not as an abstract and endlessly capacious provider of rights. In struggling over the NEA, speakers of Enlightenment and nationalist discourses attempted to preserve their privileges and the (liberal) state or (Christian) nation that might provide them while simultaneously attacking the nation (as Christian) and state (as liberal), respectively, and thus in different ways undermined the linkage of nation with state.

The Parable of Christina

While in Washington in the spring of 1992 for a meeting of the National Council on the Arts, the appointed board of famous people that makes policy for the NEA and gives final approval to their grants, I met a woman who occupied an extraordinarily complex position in the controversy. Christina was the head of a national arts advocacy agency. As such, she participated actively in efforts to preserve NEA funding and to prevent the implementation of content restrictions. When I spoke with her she talked at length about the many gay men she had befriended through her work in the arts. With regard to her own sexuality she said that she was “primarily interested in men,” leaving the details to my imagination. I sought her out for an interview, however, because I had been told by a mutual acquaintance, in whispered tones, that she was also a Christian.

Christina understood herself to adhere to what she considered “the basic principles that were taught by Christ and that you can lift out of the Bible.” And what are these? She answered carefully and sincerely:

There is a higher being who is in some way responsible for what exists. And secondly, that being has some kind of an entity that allows a personal interaction with what has been created or what has occurred. . . . (I’m trying to use words that aren’t buzzwords that evangelicals would be happy with me using.) . . . The notion of sin: A result of free will was the separation that occurred between the communion of God and the human, that put the human soul into dire jeopardy [laughs]. And the whole notion of Christianity is built around the idea that Jesus, who was God incarnate, came to earth to live a life that was perfect and exemplary and die on behalf of all people, in other words to take all of that separation . . . to act as a kind of sacrifice for all of that . . . Placing your faith in Christ
has to do with trusting that in that act you’re no longer separated from God... the notion of grace, which is, if you put your faith in Christ, what you experience in the eyes of God is unmerited favor... The other thing, and this gives people the willies, but a real Christian believes that in some way Christ is going to come back.

She said that she could honestly answer yes to the question, “Do you know Christ as your own personal savior?” though she would not normally describe her faith in that way. As if to prove a cultural affiliation with what she called “the evangelical subculture,” she asserted “a very deeply painful difficulty with promiscuity... I don’t care whether it’s two gay men or two gay women or two straight heterosexual people.” Likewise, she said that she had chosen not to go to the Mapplethorpe exhibit: “I didn’t want to see it. I’d seen pictures of the pictures and I didn’t like it.”

Given the mutually exclusive and antagonistic postures of gays (and arts advocates) with Christians, I wondered how this woman made sense of her life. She did posit as personal problems the issues of her own geographic and communal locations. She lived in Virginia, where she grew up, trying to “prove that you can go home again,” while she worked in Washington, D.C.; she spent, she said, 30 to 50 percent of her time traveling; and she told me that her best friends were to be found in New York and San Francisco. She described maintaining a certain discretion with the people she worked with in the arts, viewing her relationship with Christ as a private family matter that she did not need to share, except with those who became close friends. She used this public/private distinction to reconcile her work and her beliefs, what she called her “role as a citizen” and her “role as a Christian,” though she believed she acted on her Christian values in her work life, pointing to her efforts to raise the consciousness of the organizations that comprised the membership of her organization about workplace policies for people with AIDS.

As indicated in her avoidance of “buzzwords,” she distanced herself from the evangelical community as well. She specifically said that she did not consider herself any longer a member of that community, though she took with her “the best” of what she had grown up with: “to be really grounded in the Bible and to really understand the significance of a personal relationship with God.” She had traded in the Baptist church of her childhood for an Episcopalian church that professed a less prescriptive version of Christianity, one that makes much more room for
symbol and sacrament (which she equated with art) than the Baptist tradition does. She did maintain friendships and relationships with evangelicals. Her greatest sense of community, she said, came from the relationships she had with people, now geographically scattered, with whom she had attended Wheaton College, an evangelical institution in Illinois—the site of her realization that arts and Christ were not mutually incompatible but that, in fact, arts could be “one of God’s great gifts to humanity.”

She claimed for herself and her organization what she called a “middle ground” in the arts-funding debate. She felt it was wiser not to focus on the freedom of expression aspect of the issue, even while she was clear that she did not support the content restrictions proposed by congressional representatives of the Christian right such as Jesse Helms. Her so-called middle ground involved focusing on the level and pattern of funding distribution. She was on the liberal side of this middle, arguing against shifts in the distribution of arts moneys toward the states, proposed by congressional “moderates,” the conservative middle, that would ostensibly have allowed more local control and thus sensitivity to “community” concerns, but that amounted to a shift of funds away from national urban arts centers like New York and Los Angeles and from individual artists to organizations. And she was against proposed shifts away from the support of artists and arts organizations and toward “arts in education” programs, a proposal again from congressional moderates looking to preserve the NEA by shifting support away from what were marked as decadent or elite or politicized adults and toward innocent children. This administrative middle ground, consisting of a focus on the details of funding policy, effectively effaced both gays and Christians from the debate, even while claiming to take both into account.

In this managerial discourse, gays and Christians become structurally analogous, if different, constituents with equally valid claims, consumers with different tastes. Christina asked, “Is it possible to fund the arts in a democratic society? ... Is there a way to have a policy when multiple points of view is a fundamental idea?” The Fordist answer was to create the NEA, which offers funding and, even as the site of battles, encourages incorporation, incorporation into nonprofits and thus into the nation-state and capitalism. This battle over the NEA questioned and renegotiated that Fordist strategy, promoting a new regime of social formations even as it enacted the old one. Christina’s claim to a middle ground was
enabled by the marking of gays and Christians as extremes, but it does not do justice to the comprehensiveness of the administrative production of “community” in which she was engaged. At the same time, the upshot of the NEA controversy was not the expansion of the NEA and its incorporative powers but rather the reduction of its budget by half, and thus the reduction of its community constructing abilities. The attacks by Christians, rather than increasing their control over the subject-forming apparatus of the state, served to delegitimize the activities of the state altogether.

The Enlightenment/Nationalist Binary

The NEA controversy was enabled by, invoked and reworked, a familiar discursive battleground. Pastor Allen of Walnut Grove Baptist Church, Christina’s father’s pastor, articulated the NEA controversy as an opposition between nationalistic and Enlightenment discourses. During a group interview I conducted with Christina, her father, Pastor Allen, and his wife, Pastor Allen attempted to explain Christian activism on the NEA issue, to explain why he cared:

The place I would retreat with other Christians is to go back to the foundations of our country and the Judeo-Christian ethic that... made our country great. I don’t like the eroding away of those traditions in the name of well... we’re kinda beyond that narrow-minded thinking of our founders and we’re in a new enlightened age.

Throughout the history of our country we have defined what a family is. There are strong forces now that want to throw that out and pretend that our history didn’t matter, that we were kinda in the dark ages then and now... family means just two people living in the same place, whether you’re homosexuals, you’re lesbians... That has tremendous social implications... That is the beginning of a nation collapsing. History proves it over and over again. When there is broad tolerance, when cultures have that attitude where this is modern... then they all waltz to destruction.

A bit startled that his response to the NEA controversy made so little reference to salvation, I said, “You’re talking about what makes a nation great... What’s the significance of a nation for a Christian?”

Well, that’s another set of values. You know, nationalism is going out; internationalism, global world is coming in. That’s another set of values that helped build our country that’s being thrown out and replaced by
new. I think we should be global-minded, and as Christians especially we’re to reach the whole world and appreciate all cultures, but not to the extreme that you throw out patriotism and you throw out allegiance to your nation.

The opposition Pastor Allen articulates between nationalism and modernity or Enlightenment is certainly tied to what he called the “historical modern-fundamentalist debate.” The terms modern and fundamentalist, Susan Harding argues, were cemented as oppositional through the Scopes trial (“Representing Fundamentalism,” 390). They describe sides in a battle that took place both within religious denominations between liberal and conservative factions, and between a secular society and religious traditions. These terms have been used by academics to describe the situation of religious conservatives: James Davidson Hunter, in American Evangelicalism, casts the emergence and evolution of fundamentalism as driven by the struggle of an already existing conservative religious ideology with modernity (11–19). Harding, criticizing the uncritical participation in the modern view that scholars like Hunter evidence, suggests that fundamentalism is an invention of the modern imagination, projected to define its boundaries, serving as its necessary other (“Representing Fundamentalism,” 392). Her suggestion that these discourses are already inside each other, that the modern is implicated in the construction of the fundamentalist, is borne out by the discourse of each, insofar as it defines itself by opposition to the other. In renaming the opposition “Enlightenment vs. nationalist,” I want to emphasize the historical specificity of the NEA controversy in the moment of “globalization” and evoke a somewhat different discursive legacy.

As many writers have noted, the “nation” entails a central ambivalence, an ambivalence highlighted by the very notion that there could be an antagonism between Enlightenment and nationalist discourses (Bhabha, Nation and Narration, 1–3, 292–294). The usual history of the nation is as modern, as a product of the Enlightenment, leaving behind, if growing out of, religion and dynasty as forms of social organization, instantiating a liberal, fraternal, horizontal, rational imagination of social space (Anderson, Imagined Communities). However, as Habermas argues, emerging from the French (and U.S.) Revolution as a standardized and increasingly pervasive form for the exercise of sovereignty and rights, the territorial boundaries of constitutional states would be utterly arbitrary save for particularistic (not to mention hierarchical and oppo-
sitional) notions of culture, language, and blood. These notions frequently ground the nation in re-membered histories of religion and blood or race (Habermas, “European Nation State”). Fundamentalist and nationalist movements have the function of generating patriotic enthusiasm, the willingness on the part of citizens to promote national/imperial economic interests.

The ambivalence of the nation-state has been fully evident in the United States. Historical and cultural particularity in the United States has meant that Christianity has actively articulated many aspects of contemporary policy and politics. The Supreme Court’s decision on the Georgia sodomy law, *Bowers v. Hardwick* (478 Sup. Ct. 186 [U.S. 1986]), does so explicitly; and *Miller v. California* (113 Sup. Ct. 2360 [U.S. 1973]), the decision that defines obscenity by referring to “community standards,” is another obvious instance. As Christina’s self-explication demonstrates, the liberal public/private distinction actually allows (dominant) private beliefs to be deployed in public life. On the other hand, Enlightenment liberation movements, civil rights movements, have been central to, if sometimes the unintended consequence of, the construction of the liberal subject. Such movements have at times worked against the particularity of the nation, pushing it to fulfill the promise of abstraction, of neutrality toward “private” difference.

Pastor Allen’s nationalist reaction to globalization reiterates the Romantic anticapitalism of the Burkean reaction to the French Revolution and the fascist reaction to capitalist-modernization (Carlston, *Thinking Fascism*). Many of the terms—the city, the homosexual—epitomizing the “decline” posited in that Romantic discourse recur in Christian nationalist rhetoric. The opposition between Enlightenment and nationalist discourses in this controversy, while deploying available discursive resources, was not inevitable but rather seems to have been provoked by economic and political transformations. Its appearance suggests a crisis in the complicity between the particular culture and history of the nation and the modern state. It is a cliché to say that the right, in its loss of the communist enemy, turned to internal enemies, such as gays and lesbians, for their sense of purpose and definition, but I suspect that the reappearance of the opposition between Enlightenment and nationalist discourses at this moment did have a significant relationship with the expansion of capitalist hegemony.
The joining of modern and in a sense premodern discourses in the construction of the nation-state is possible so long as the nation is actually the unit of modern economic and political life. But to the extent that modernity, especially in the form of capitalism, begins to articulate other geographic sites and scales—and the discourse of globalization does seem to refigure the globe in nonnational units—a particularistic nationalism may work at cross purposes with the Enlightenment discourses of modernization and progress that articulate and are articulated by the state. Culturally defined national formations, including identity movements such as that of gays and lesbians, may remain or become important units of production and consumption, but they are delinked from the state as a regulator of capital flows and subject formation. In its role as an apparatus of capital, the state, separated from the nation, is freed from the task of producing a coherent national citizenry and enabled to promote international alliances while allowing the elaboration of internal difference, disparities of wealth and power that benefit multinational corporations rather than national bourgeoisies.

Space and Time
In the context of the NEA controversy, Enlightenment and nationalist discourses were organized as oppositional around common points of reference. At each common site the discourses articulated matching but reversed binary evaluations. As the attempts to rearrange the regional distribution of NEA funds suggests, spatial claims are central: in the Enlightenment discourse the urban is the site of civilization, sophistication, and urbanity, while the rural home of the fundamentalist is a bastion of ignorance and incivility; the urban is the site at which diverse cultures meet to learn from and fertilize one another, while the rural is the site of backwardness. As Holly, the person responsible for arts issues for a gay and lesbian lobbying group, said:

[Sadomasochistic imagery is] not something that somebody from Buffalo, New York, is going to find acceptable. . . . The Moral Majority sends out mindless stuff. They are just playing on fears. Because education is not out there, because people have not allowed different points of view to be brought into education, you can just play on their ignorance. These people might not even understand or know about Michelangelo, or DaVinci, or know that Goya might be controversial.
For the nationalist discourse, by contrast, the heartland is the root, the foundation, the origin of a communal life with its own organic integrity, while the urban is the site of overrefinement, decadence, the rootlessness and impurity—the pollution, penetration, cultural miscegenation—that harkens the fall of a civilization. As one pastor explained, using a Biblical example, “Corinth was a center of trade and so different cultures were constantly meeting there and so all kinds of sin broke out: thievery, incest, homosexuality.”

There have been a variety of figures for this rootless, decadent pollution at different times and in different places: Jews are a traditional figure; in the 1980s gays and people with AIDS were salient figures; and in the 1990s immigrants of color were vilified.

The temporal dimension of Enlightenment discourse is the discourse of progress and emancipation—the future is open-ended and improving. The narrative trajectories in this discourse trace stories of development and perfectibility with reference to individuals and groups, describing the sequential granting of rights to women, African Americans, gays, and lesbians. The individual is freed by a society organized on the basis of rights, procedural rights, civil rights, to fulfill his own desires and abilities, to express himself. But as Holly points out, for Christians, the connection of expression with civil rights works in reverse; rights are not meant to enable self-development and expression, but rather, the expression of the subject is used to measure their worthiness for citizenship and civil rights:

If you can’t convince people that the art work and the images that your artists create…are not obscene…because…it’s a representation or an expression of a group of people that are always seen as a certain type of sexual entity, then you’re not going to be able to convince them that we are legitimate enough to have our civil rights, because they see that all our actions, all our words, all our depictions are obscene, then, therefore, we are obscene people.

The granting of civil rights—the rights to expression, self-elaboration, and development—depends on a basic optimism about those to whom the rights are granted. Christians did not seem to share this Enlightenment optimism.

The temporal trajectory in the nationalist story is one of destiny or decline, the fall of civilization, the apocalypse. While it is certainly indi-
individuals who will ultimately be saved by Christ from the apocalypse, it is not through the exercise of rights to individual expression but rather through freely willed obedience to a set of moral absolutes, through “discretion.” *Discretion* was the term used repeatedly by Christians I interviewed in Washington to describe the change they wanted to see in the operation of the NEA; they didn’t want to see the whole agency sacrificed, they just wanted it to show some discretion. They wanted it to show that it had internalized a set of external standards. And what standards should those be? Well, as a man I met in the gym in Tupelo, Mississippi, suggested, “The Bible would be a good guide.” “Discretion,” here as for Christina, is the site at which the boundary between public and private is porous, at which the openness of the liberal state can be limited by cultural and communal particularity. Run by experts, as a supposedly value-neutral meritocracy, the NEA had ostensibly refused to use discretion.

In addition to their matching but inverted spatial and temporal schemas, the Enlightenment and nationalist discourses each make high culture–low culture distinctions. In the Enlightenment discourse, reason, education, expertise, experience, empirical exploration, and representation both of the world and the psyche (the source of that much debated “expression”), as well as the familiarity with and tolerance of difference that come with such knowledge, are marked as positive terms against ignorance, fear, bigotry, and “narrow-mindedness” (PFAW membership pamphlet, 1992). Christina and many other arts advocates defended the peer review process of grant selection, the selection of grantees by experts in the particular artistic field of specialization.

Conservatives, on the other hand, lobbied for the introduction of lay people onto the selection committees. In the nationalist discourse sophistication and expertise are cast as the signs of elitism—the highness of the culture is negatively marked—and are thus contrasted with the common sense of the common man—the low gets a positive valence. Sophistication and expertise are signs of hubris, of humans thinking they can act on their own authority instead of following the rules of God: as “heartland” displaces “rural backwater” when we shift from Enlightenment to nationalist discourse, the positively valenced willingness to take a moral stance displaces the derogatory attribution of narrow-mindedness. Pastor Allen again expressed this reversal of valence by critiquing the Enlightenment discourse:
What I read between the lines... was that there seemed to be a homosexual agenda in some of this, and a way to go along with their agenda that this is just another group that’s being discriminated against; and they should have a right to display their art... and if you’re offended, you’re a narrow-minded, bigoted person... And that’s what I resented, that it was being used as another way to promote that broad-minded approach that says it’s just another alternate lifestyle, there’s no problem, you should be tolerant... it’s trying to categorize anybody that comes up with moral stances as some kind of “you’re out of it.”

Mrs. Allen argued that the arts issue “is almost used as a hammer, it’s a very political issue.... Conservatives are using it to make points with their constituency and the so-called liberal side is using it to create an image, or cast an image on the conservatives.” Even more importantly, framed as an opposition between Enlightenment and nationalist discourses, the arts issue was a site for a debate over the very nature of the nation. Though in financial terms, the NEA is a trivial part of the state apparatus, the controversy over it enabled a clear articulation of national cultural particularity (the limits set through moral stances) in opposition to the boundariless abstract neutrality of the liberal “modern” state. In the context of this opposition, it is no surprise that the Christian criticism of the NEA did not primarily result in discretion, the deployment of Christian beliefs through the mechanisms of the state (through, for instance, congressional imposition of content restrictions) but rather worked most effectively to support the dismantling of the state apparatus itself.

Traveling

The spatial and cultural oppositions articulated in the controversy shaped my own research. As a lesbian and an academic, born and raised in New York City, living in San Francisco, I lived amid the gay community and had easy access to the arts world. I started my research at the arts service organization for which my mother served as a board member, which happened to be centrally involved in the legislative games over the NEA. Through my connections there I was introduced to many other arts administrators. Arts administrators recognized me as one of their own, opened their file drawers, and invited me to meetings; when we all camped out in Washington for the quarterly meetings of the National Council, I
was able to join in on lunches and dinners. Through another route, an old friend, I made acquaintance with Tim Miller and attended court hearings of the NEA Four. To the extent that I wished to pursue these avenues, they were available to me.

By contrast, my arrival on the Christian scene felt much more difficult and indirect. I knew no one who could give me a free pass to the heads of Christian organizations. I contacted a few independently and conducted a few awkward interviews, aware that I could not even begin to know how I appeared to them, what questions to ask, presumptions to make. I decided to back up and try to learn more generally about conservative Christian perspectives, beliefs, and culture. I assumed that to find “real” Christian conservatives I would have to travel away from my own world. Although all I really had to do was turn on my television or walk across the street to the Christian bookstore, I enacted my presumption that Christians were “other” by going elsewhere.

I went first to a church in San Jose, one of the new “megachurches,” as they have been called. Anything but backward, this church, located on Disk Drive (as in computer disk), looked like an eighties restaurant, spacious and airy, pale pink with green trim and wall-to-wall carpets. The first half of the service at this church “in the Pentecostal tradition” was a rousing rock and soul concert performed by a large band with lead and backup singers. The sermon explicitly addressed the concerns and interests (drug addiction, Lexus automobiles, the desire for economic prosperity) of its impressively multiracial (are they really multicultural if they are all members of this church?) Silicon Valley clientele. This church put together a Spiritual Warfare conference, bringing in an international array of speakers, in preparation for mounting a campaign against the Satanic forces to the north (San Francisco). Susan Harding explained this effort as part of a new theological innovation: she had heard quite a bit of talk lately of “regional demons,” which appeared to justify local political activism — take over the school board to exorcise the demons.

Meanwhile I did also attend a church in San Francisco, a Baptist church that substantially fulfilled my stereotypes. I entered this church with the same kind of cover used by gay reporters at Christian conventions. I concocted a story about visiting from Stanford and being new to the area, feeling that I needed to disguise and distance myself from the urban gay culture I assumed San Francisco represented. I was greeted at
the door by older women dressed in pastels and took my place in the starched and sparsely populated narrow sanctuary where I listened to a middle-aged, heavy-set, double-breasted, pink-faced preacher threatening damnation as the consequence of ecumenism and praying for “this country to be on the right path.” Vehicle references here were to Fords, Chevrolets, and camels. However, despite the fact that this church seemed to match the image of Baptist churches I had seen in movies, it too, as a member of the Traditional Values Coalition headed by Lou Sheldon, was in some ways on the cutting edge politically. Sometime after my staid Sunday morning attendance, Sheldon and his following of gay protesters paid a much more raucous visit to this church (Levy).

In the spring of 1993, I took a driving trip through the south, organized primarily around stops in Tupelo, Mississippi, the home of Donald Wildmon and the American Family Association (Figure 8), and Nashville, Tennessee. My contact in Tupelo was at the newspaper: a magazine writer I knew who had done an article on Wildmon put me in touch with a local reporter. Ann, along with her friend, Tim, also a writer for the paper, were identified to me as the most progressive clique on the staff, though the paper as a whole was considered liberal for Tupelo (notwithstanding the fact that its editorial policy was explicitly antigay). I was welcomed with open arms. Files were opened, lunches and dinners were arranged, tours of town were provided. Clearly there was some hunger for what another reporter, Wayne, called an “exotic” visitor, which he translated as someone from the coast; he said that exotics only turned up in search of Wildmon.

When Wayne and I met for dinner after his Lions Club meeting, he told me the story of the various versions of Christianity he had participated in through his life, Baptist, Methodist, Catholic, and through his current girlfriend, Church of God. He explained that while he doesn’t believe every word of the Bible, he goes to church because it makes him feel good: he thinks of himself as a good person, honest and generous, a community-minded person, giving to the community by doing volunteer work with a church-affiliated charity group and by participating in the community theater. Despite Wayne’s church-hopping, it was also clear that church membership was constrained by, and constituted, social hierarchies that were not quite so flexible; the old First Methodist Church, for instance, was described to me as the high-society church that the upper echelon of the newspaper management patronized (Figure
9). No one I met at the newspaper had ever attended Donald Wildmon’s church, which was located in a relatively new tract-house development (Figure 10).

While I was welcomed at the newspaper, I found that I could not, at least not in the course of a week, get any closer to Donald Wildmon than I would have been if I had stayed in San Francisco. I spoke with his brother Allen a couple of times on the phone: once from San Francisco during which call he told me not to bother to come to Tupelo, and once while I was in Tupelo, during which he submitted to a five-minute interview, interrupted by his asking me repeatedly what magazine I worked for; I had mailed him substantial documentation of my university affiliation and on this occasion explained again that I was a student working on a dissertation. His reply was to ask moments later if I was a freelancer. People in Tupelo suggested two possible explanations for this: either he doesn’t know what a dissertation is, or he is just paranoid. Both ignorance of dissertations and paranoia suggest low culture habitation. I think he was sophisticated enough to know that I could not possibly be of use to him if I was not from the media and that, if I was from the media, he needed to carefully control our interaction. Being a media-watch organization, the AFA is highly conscious of media portrayals of Christians. For instance, Donald Wildmon did grant an interview
to the local paper, but this interview was accompanied by an elaborate contract with regard to the format of publication and was followed by plausible threats of a lawsuit. (AFA has a legal branch and did in fact sue to stop distribution of a film about the organization called Damned in the USA.)

My stop in Nashville was hosted by my partner’s close old friend from their days together in New York. She had become a Church of Christ Christian and had moved to Nashville (which she called the buckle on the Bible Belt, a belt with lots of buckles—Memphis, Dallas, Atlanta—if all claims are to be believed) in order to be with other Christians. She spoke of her move much the way I speak of my own relocation to the gay mecca, as San Francisco is often called: she described a sense of liberty and support in being able to say to a coworker, as she walked into a tough meeting, “Pray for me.” I stayed at a hotel that was literally right next door to the headquarters of the Southern Baptist Convention, stopped in their extensive bookstore, and attended services at three different churches. This tourist approach to church-going certainly did not yield a sense of understanding; I left Nashville with the realization that I did not know what Christianity meant to the participants; I did not know how church-going structured their lives or articulated their politics. But at the same time, Christians and church attendance were
starting to feel more familiar to me. I felt less and less that I was about to be discovered as the evil other. Attacks on gays were not a central part of any of these services and, appearing in these churches as a friend of one of the regular congregants, my presence provoked little discussion of the political controversies that motivated my attendance. But the normalization of church-going also defamiliarized my relation to the gay “community.”

The last stop on my tour was Washington, D.C. I met my partner and several friends from San Francisco there. We assembled to participate in the March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay, and Bi Equal Rights and Liberty. Milling and marching amid hundreds of thousands of gays and lesbians, I found that I felt oddly “other” and awkward as I participated in the requisite performances of gay identity.

Reversal

The notion that communities are economic units, that the bonding produced by particular values serves the abstract needs of the circulation of capital, is an argument that I have been making throughout this book. But the debate over the NEA seemed to disrupt the supplementary relation between the particularity of the nation and the abstraction of the liberal state as an apparatus for the facilitation of capital flows. While I
would suggest that in part this allowed the constitution of nonnational social formations for capital—gays and Christians as niche markets—the separation of nation and state through the opposition of Enlightenment and nationalist discourses was also experienced as a lack. The insufficiency of each discourse to stand on its own led both sets of speakers to make recourse to the discourse of the other. Enlightenment speakers cast themselves as nationalists and nationalist speakers cast themselves as Enlightened and as subjects of rights.

Rebecca, yet another executive director of yet another (in this case regional) nonprofit arts service organization, gave a passionate, tearfully patriotic explanation for her engagement with this issue:

If any organization in the country gave us a feeling of national identity it was the National Endowment for the Arts. If there was any one institution that gave us pride as artists with a capital A and not theatre workers, dancers, curators, yabadee yabadee ya, it was the National Endowment for the Arts. It put us on the map, it put us on a par—I’m getting emotional [tears]—with other industries. And the fact that those political opportunists and those from the far right chose that agency to attack—they attacked its right to exist—it was emotionally devastating. They were pushing us away from the table. They were saying you do not belong in the ecosystem of the American economy and in the social structure of our nation… you do not belong, you do not do work that is significant to the health of our nation or our nation’s children.

Obviously, she doesn’t sound much like Pastor Allen. Her nation is a different one, an ecosystem, a society, an economy, rather than a community, but she does have nation and she does have family.

Although she clearly speaks her patriotism in an impassioned way, she also casts nationalist rhetoric as a deliberate strategy:

One of our frustrations was that it was so easy for the conservatives to make a case against freedom of expression. Who is going to argue with “Why should public dollars go for a photograph that shows a man with his fist up somebody else’s anal orifice?” I mean really, honestly, even here [a liberal urban area]… In the same 60 seconds how can you explain to someone who is a construction worker or someone who typically you wouldn’t think generally goes to the symphony all the time, how can you explain to the taxi driver, in 60 seconds, the value of art. Finally, we came to the place where we realized that if we were going to be politically smart, we had to be more American than they were. And that’s when People for the American Way got on board. We had to reframe the issue, not “I’m for pornography,” but “I’m for freedom.”
As even its name suggests, the strategy of PFAW was to promote abstract rights such as free expression as values on a par with the moral values promoted by the Christian right.

In the face of accusations of elitism, arts advocates frequently spoke of the communal value of the arts, but also of the need to instill in artists a greater commitment to and engagement with their communities, if they were to earn the popular support necessary for continued funding. One prominent Washington, D.C., arts lobbyist, Jane, for instance, envisioned a new advocacy organization that would do a public relations campaign to help the middle ["the American people out there, people in the square"] realize what their investment is ... that art and cultural diversity help us understand each other the way nothing else will ... We are a country that is based on communities and linkages of communities.

This campaign was necessary because

As the debate grew both sides became more arrogant ... artists felt that they were entitled to this money. The arts community from the very beginning didn’t even know they were under siege, because they feel they are right and rightness of course will win. And artists by their nature are individuals: they don’t cook together and they don’t get together for cause.

Some arts organizations attempted to remedy the arrogance and individualism of the artists, to instill in artists the sense of commitment to and engagement with community, necessary to earn popular support for the arts. Dance/USA, the national advocacy organization for the field of dance, an organization “linked” via coalition to Jane’s organization, had its 1992 national conference on “The Dance Community Working in Communities.” The conference featured talks on topics such as “The New Community Paradigm,” “Community Leadership,” and “Presenters in Communities: Making Partnerships Work,” which aimed to articulate partnerships with for-profit companies, audience development, and the development of grassroots activism for the arts in terms of community service.

There are certainly important differences between this pluralist nationalism, which founds the nation in a “linkage of communities” and that assimilates difference through a balancing of individualism and community, and the exclusionary national narrative of the one true and original organic national community deployed by conservative Christians.
However, in claiming “community” for artists, arts advocates rely on the nationalist notion that the nation is epitomized by the heartland, the locus of the real American community. In its own defense, NEA itself often trumpeted its “Folk Arts” program.

The most interesting appropriation, though, was of the arts and “expression,” by conservative Christians. Mrs. Allen and other D.C. Christian conservatives claimed the cultural terrain as one that Christians ought not yield to “liberals,” who, they asserted, had until then controlled it. In Washington I was relentlessly confronted with arts-appreciative Christians. Mrs. Allen taught art appreciation classes and had recently given a lecture on the National Cathedral that Christina’s father, himself a jazz musician, had found particularly enlightening. Andrea Sheldon, Lou’s daughter and a Washington lobbyist, also went on at some length about her appreciation of beautiful and uplifting artwork and especially recommended to me the National Cathedral.

Jim Ross, a staff person for a famously conservative senator, told me about his wife the artist, who had dragged him around to more galleries than he really cared to go to before they were married. (Since their children were born she had given up her artistic pursuits.) It was through her that he had learned of the narrow and prejudicial funding practices of the NEA: they only fund the avant-garde works of a small clique. Ross elaborated for me a conservative ideology of art: in his view, art should be anchored in fundamentals, such as skills in figurative representation, rather than in the “self-expression” favored by liberals. The Heritage Foundation Backgrounder on “The National Endowment for the Arts: Misusing Taxpayers’ Money,” by Robert Knight, draws out a very similar position. Like Ross, Knight lends legitimacy to this type of art by naming experts and art schools who represent, study, and teach it, and asserts that even though this is a developed and legitimate approach, artists working within this ideology are systematically rejected by the NEA.

Mrs. Allen seemed a couple of steps ahead of Ross and Knight, appropriating not only arts but “expression” for Christians:

I think for so long conservatives and Christians haven’t had any sense of a cultural mandate. . . . And I think because there has been such a vacuum in the cultural arena these other agendas have had possession without any contest. Maybe what Christians really need to do is involve themselves in the arts and through artistic media make their contribution
in such a good way that it communicates... express[es] our worldview, our perspective.

Displacement

Mrs. Allen recognized that, in fighting over federal arts funding, Christians had appropriated the Enlightenment discourse of rights. Anti-NEA activists were extremely successful with the rhetoric of taxpayers' rights not to be offended by government-funded art. Jesse Helms used the formula of antidiscrimination law in his legislation aimed at limiting the content of funded works. He would have prohibited the funding of “material which denigrates the object or beliefs or the adherents of a particular religion or non-religion or which denigrates, debases or reviles a person or group or class of citizens on the basis of race, creed, sex, handicap, age, or national origin.” But Mrs. Allen wasn’t sure that this was such a good idea:

I feel that maybe Christians in their tactic of talking in terms of rights, my right as a Christian to have this or that, I don’t know how productive that’s going to be in the long run... I mean we do need political involvement to say what we think. But in, in terms of saying my right, I wonder if we’re just adopting the other side’s tactic of “my rights.”

Though she didn’t explain herself, it seems clear that deployment of rights discourse by Christians would be too likely to legitimize the claims of gays and lesbians as well.

In his book on the gay market, Grant Lukenbill says, “The gay and lesbian consumer revolution is at once both Madisonian and Jeffersonian in its textbook defense of free enterprise and simultaneous call for federal government to uphold their rights in housing and employment based on sexual identity” (Untold Millions, 83). Lukenbill here casts rights as a form of nationalism, as the enactment by the state of the particular valuing of gays and lesbians, and this nationalism as necessary to correct and uphold the neutrality of the market. This formulation applies as well to the participants in the NEA controversy, who all seemed to need to link the powers of the state, the rights of abstract citizens within the state, to some particular conceptualization of the values embodied by the nation. So while the opposition of nationalist and Enlightenment discourses works to undermine the linkage of the two in the constitution of the nation-state, the recourse to nationalist discourse by Enlightenment speakers and to Enlightenment discourse by nationalist
speakers suggests that this separation involves losses and reveals weaknesses in each discourse.

If the nation is separated from the state, the nation becomes merely another site of production and consumption; Christians are merely a market niche equivalent in many ways to gays. Although conservatives arguing against the NEA often suggested that the arts ought to be subject to free market forces, it is precisely Christians who stand to lose through the separation of their values from the power of the state. Meanwhile, if the state is separated from the nation, gays would seem to lose the protection afforded by abstraction, by the indifference of the state to communal particularity. The linkage of nation and state would seem to protect both groups in different ways from the vagaries of the market. It protects gays precisely by subjecting them to citizenship and capital, affording them certain limited kinds of recognition. It protects Christians by producing a particularized hierarchy of citizenship through its attention to the particularity of communal values. While globalized capital also attends to particular communal difference, it is not so clear that it will pick out Christians for the dominant role.

The opposition of Enlightenment and nationalist discourses clears a path for the new social formations of globalization. Christian attacks on the NEA are fundamentalist/nationalist assertions against the promotion of difference, but they are also part of a neoconservative clearing away of regulatory and distributional barriers at the site of the nation. Gay and arts community arguments for the NEA look like retrograde modernist attempts to hold onto a coherent nation-state that is the site of rights, but they are also an attempt to inhabit the state as it regulates capital flows for the production of queer communities that exceed the nation. As enthusiastic participants in a capitalism that is superseding the nation-state, gays help to undermine the structure that could support their claims to rights and Christians undermine the nation in which they cast themselves as privileged members.

In articulating the structural similarities of gays and Christians as communities organized through nonprofits and their complicity in producing a transformation of social and political structures for globalization, I hope that I have unsettled our complacent participation in articulating the binary opposition between them. The discourses each articulate are remarkably ambivalent, simultaneously promoting and obstructing
the power of the nation-state and thus the expansion of capital. Linked to each other through the discourse of globalization that simultaneously produces them as autonomous, in speaking against each other for their own legitimacy as authentic communities, both miss the real site of political and economic struggle, that is, the processes of production and consumption through which they are constituted as communities.