Harvey Milk’s (sexual and sacred) body

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Abstract

Harvey Milk has been constituted as a queer saint. This article, in the self-identifying voice of a gay man, explores the significance of Harvey Milk’s queer cultural sanctity in relation to his sexual embodiment, emphasizing that ‘Saint Harvey’ was a leading figure in a movement of sexual liberation and was himself a strongly sexual being, facts sometimes downplayed in his representation as a sacred figure in contrast with his vitally sexual pre-assassination body. Examining the phenomenon of the ‘canonization’ of a sexually embodied gay Jewish agnostic, the article asks what happens when Milk’s sacralization is explicitly tied to his sexuality, focusing on a central question: can a saint be a sexual being, not peripherally or incidentally, but centrally and essentially?

KEYWORDS: QUEER; SEXUALITY; MARTYR; SAINT; SANCTITY; ICON

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doi: https://doi.org/10.1558/bar.15678
Introduction
Harvey Bernard Milk was assassinated in San Francisco City Hall on Monday, November 27, 1978. A member of the Board of Supervisors (San Francisco’s combined county and city council), Milk was the first openly gay man to win public office in San Francisco and in the entire state of California. Along with Mayor George Moscone, he was shot by Daniel White, a former member of the Board of Supervisors, for reasons that remain a matter of controversy (Eyerman 2012:402–3, 405). On Tuesday, November 27, 2018, I participated in a rally and march in San Francisco held in recognition of the fortieth anniversary of the assassinations of Moscone and Milk, within which the commemoration of Milk was given primary emphasis. At the rally prior to the march, I met and spoke with an Episcopal Church deacon, who was carrying a Byzantine-style icon created by Robert Lentz in 1987, which represents Milk as a saint. I was familiar with this image, having a copy printed on a card a friend sent me from San Francisco in 1990. This icon was utilized in the brochure for a 2003 exhibition about Milk organized by the San Francisco Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender (GLBT) Historical Society: ‘Saint Harvey: The Life and Afterlife of a Modern Gay Martyr.’ Lentz’s icon is one of at least four images of which I am aware that explicitly represent Milk as a saint by deploying such traditional iconographic elements as the halo or nimbus.

Harvey Milk is a queer saint – in two senses of the word ‘queer.’ First, he is a gay (‘queer’) man venerated by queer people within queer cultural contexts. Second, he is an individual identified as a ‘saint,’ whose identity stands in various ways outside the traditional and conventional norms of religious cultural sanctity, as a dictionary definition of ‘queer’ has it: ‘differing in some odd way from what is usual or normal’ (Merriam-Webster n. d.). Milk was a gay Jewish agnostic, an activist in a movement for the rights and freedom of sexual minority communities that were in his lifetime, and have remained, under intense pressure from conservative religious activists. Nevertheless, Milk has been named, represented, and ritualized as a sacred figure through the creative deployment of conventionally religious cultural forms (almost entirely Christian in origin) in a variety of queer cultural contexts. Taking this queer canonization as a starting point, this article explores the complex relationship between Saint Harvey Milk’s queer sanctity and his queer sexuality, focusing on his embodied identity.

This study is presented in the self-identifying voice of a gay man and makes no pretense of being purely descriptive. In agreement with many other queer scholars, I take a queerly normative, but critically disciplined, stance in relation to the subject matter treated here. This approach emerged
from reflection on my own multivalently queer relationship to Harvey Milk, stimulated by an encounter with images of Milk while I was working in the archives of the San Francisco GLBT Historical Society on research for the larger project to which the present article is related. In May 2018, I was examining the contents of a box of miscellaneous items, with a particular interest in publicity posters from past November 27 commemorations. Along with these posters, the box contained a large-size copy of the Lentz icon, which I briefly examined and set aside, noting that it must have been in the possession of Milk’s former lover, Scott Smith, who had preserved the materials now in this archival collection. Then, as I dug deeper into the box, I came upon a small collection of old photographs of Harvey Milk from his time as a young naval officer (c. 1951–5). Several of these pictures showed Milk posing in a swimsuit, displaying a lean, muscular body. The Harvey Milk in these pictures was, I knew, a sexually active gay man. He had been sexually active, in fact, since the age of fourteen (Faderman 2018:21; Shilts 1982:6–7). Looking at the pictures, I took note of their evident erotic invitation; this was a man who wanted to be looked at with desire by other men, and I gave him the gaze he had invited. ‘Not bad at all,’ I thought. Then, disciplined scholar that I am, I recorded my own gaze as part of my data-gathering and reflected on the archival juxtaposition of beefcake images of Harvey Milk with his representation according to the conventions of Byzantine Christian iconography, in which he appeared like any other chaste holy figure. Saint Harvey had been sexy. From this raw initial observation has developed my inquiry into the relationship between sexuality and sanctity, between Harvey Milk’s sexual body and his sacred body.

The body of a martyr

A martyr bears witness to the great value of an ideal or a cause by giving up their bodily life for it. But their bodily death is not the end of their life; the martyr lives on. The phenomenon of martyrdom is, of course, broader than categories of conventional religion. Indeed, it could be argued that martyrs for ‘secular’ causes are more self-sacrificial than ‘religious’ martyrs, because they may well die without any conviction of a metaphysical reward for their suffering, without clear hope for a conscious life-after-death. Such a martyr was the non-religious, culturally Jewish Harvey Milk, who nevertheless strongly anticipated his own death and prepared for it. In each of three versions of a political testament Milk recorded onto cassette tapes on November 18, 1977, shortly after his election, he referred to the possibility of his assassination, but only in the recording left with his friend and speech-writer, Frank Robinson, did he speak the now widely quoted
words, ‘If a bullet should enter my brain, let that bullet destroy every closet
door’ (Shilts 1982:372). With this declaration, Milk assigned significance
to his anticipated death and invited others to do the same. In addition to
the recorded wills, Milk left behind a poem, which Anne Kronenberg, his
campaign manager and aide (and potential successor), read at his memo-
rial service on November 30, 1978 (Shilts 1982:287):

I can be killed with ease
I can be cut right down
But I cannot fall back into my closet
I have grown
I am not by myself
I am too many
I am all of us.

On November 27, 1978, Milk was in his office in San Francisco City Hall
when Dan White arrived and asked to speak with him in the office that he,
White, had vacated upon his resignation from the Board of Supervisors.
Once they were in the office, White, a former police officer, produced his
service revolver, loaded with hollow point bullets, five of which he fired into
Harvey Milk’s body. The last of those five explosive bullets was delivered
at close range to the back of Milk’s head, into his brain – making Milk’s
memorable words seem like a prophecy, with the violent fulfillment of its
protasis requiring the realization of its apodosis. Harvey’s nephew, Stuart
Milk, a teenager at the time of his uncle’s death and now the president of
the Harvey Milk Foundation, has in fact applied the word ‘prophecy’ to his
revered uncle’s words in Facebook posts on the anniversary of his death
(Milk, 2016).

Cleve Jones, who was twenty-four at the time and serving as one of Milk’s
City Hall aides, described arriving at City Hall while Milk’s body was still in
Dan White’s office and catching sight of his mentor’s feet through the open
doorway. Jones recalled the thoughts that filled his mind in the hours that
followed that encounter with Milk’s dead body: ‘The only thing I can think
is that it is over. It is all over. He was my mentor and friend and he is gone.
He was our leader and he is gone. It is over.’ During the candlelight march
and the vigil at City Hall, Jones continued to think, ‘And now it was all over.’
But Jones corrected his original thoughts, from his present vantage point:
‘I was wrong. It wasn’t over. It was just the beginning’ (Jones 2016:162–3).

In the hours, days, weeks, and months that followed Milk’s death –
leading up to the jury verdict in White’s trial of mere manslaughter for his
assassination of both Harvey Milk and George Moscone – the conviction
solidified among Milk’s friends and supporters that he could be rendered
immortal through their work of memory, a conviction that found expression in a slogan: ‘Harvey Milk Lives!’ That slogan was shouted during the rioting at City Hall that followed the verdict in White’s trial, although it was met with derision by some in the seething mob (Shilts 1982:330). The morning after that so-called White Night Riot, it was found spray painted on a wall in Milk’s Castro Street neighborhood, the graffito preserved in a photograph taken by Daniel Nicoletta, another of Milk’s young disciples (Nourmand 2017:74–5). A year after Milk’s death, a march from the Castro neighborhood to City Hall took place in re-enactment of the march on the night of November 27, 1978. In this march, a banner was carried, which Cleve Jones had painted, bearing the words, ‘GAY LOVE IS GAY POWER – HARVEY MILK LIVES’ (Cleve Jones, interview with author, November 28, 2018). In a speech delivered at City Hall at the end of the march, Jones declared, ‘We are here tonight to dedicate ourselves to the legend of Harvey Milk, that word of his dream and struggle may spread across this and all nations … We are here to spread the word, so that our sisters and brothers everywhere may know of the life and death of Harvey Milk.’ Jones then affirmed that Milk was a martyr, but ‘not our first martyr, nor our last’ (Jones 2016:184).

The body of a saint?

Harvey Milk indeed became a ‘nationally known martyr for the gay rights movement,’ who survived his bodily death through the agency of those who performed the work of generating, sustaining, and propagating his memory, ‘agents of memory’ (Krutzsch 2019:17; Vinitzky-Seroussi 2009:7–8). Many of those agents of memory, who knew and worked with Milk, firmly asserted that Milk’s identity as a martyr did not make him a ‘saint.’ In the speech he delivered at the march on the first anniversary of Milk’s death, Jones referred to him as ‘the man who was neither genius nor saint,’ and he repeated this judgment to me when I interviewed him (Jones 2016:184; interview with author, October 8, 2018). Likewise, Harry Britt, who was appointed to replace Milk on the Board of Supervisors, stated, ‘He was no saint’ (Harry Britt, interview with author, May 22, 2018). Whereas these agents of memory have vigorously rejected the identification of Milk as a saint, insisting quite correctly that ‘martyr’ and ‘saint’ are not identical identity categories, many LGBTQ+ Christians have followed their tradition’s norms of equating the categories, have warmly embraced the iconic signification of Lentz’s image of Milk, and have treated him as a saint of the Christian canon. For example, the Episcopalian deacon’s mode of carrying the icon during both the 2018 and the 2019 assassination memorials,
cradled in her arms and illuminated with a candle, corresponded closely with the standard ritualization of icons in Byzantine Christianity (Figure 1). There have even been instances of Milk’s intercessions being invoked using the common Catholic formula of prayer to a saint, such as in Facebook and Twitter posts on November 27, 2018 by ‘Out at St Paul,’ the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender ministry at New York City’s Roman Catholic Church of St Paul the Apostle: ‘Harvey Milk, pray for us’ (Facebook, Out at St Paul, November 27, 2018; @outatstpaul, November 27, 2018). Similarly, Kittredge Cherry, a minister in the Metropolitan Community Church, composed a ‘Litany of Queer Saints,’ which included the following petition:

Saint Harvey Milk, martyred gay rights pioneer, pray for us. We have a long way yet to go. Thank you, Holy Harvey, for having stood with the wounded and oppressed in the LBGTQI communities and now inspire all to work for justice as you did. Harvey Milk, such a beautiful soul, shine on always (Cherry 2021a).
This petition linked to Cherry’s frequently updated essay about Milk in her *QSpirit* website, a rich source for information on the various ways in which Milk has been described, represented, and ritualized as a saint, as well as on contestations of that identification (Cherry 2021b).

Representing a perspective outside of Christianity, but linked to it in complex ways, Grand Mother Vish-Knew (formerly, Sister Vicious Power Hungry Bitch; Kenneth Bunch), co-founder of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, enthusiastically affirmed to me that Milk is a saint in the same way that the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence are nuns: ‘We’re twenty-first century nuns … Yeah, we’re nuns. We’re just different nuns … So, you can be a different saint. Different cardinal, different pope’ (Grand Mother Vish-Knew, interview with author, October 6, 2018). As Melissa M. Wilcox emphasized, the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence do genuinely see themselves as nuns, quoting Sister Saviour Applause of the Russian River Sisters, who referred to the Sisters as ‘fuckin’ modern-day badass drag queen superhero nuns!’ (Wilcox 2018:1). Likewise, for many LGBTQ people, Harvey Milk really is a saint – a fuckin’ modern-day badass superhero saint, for the simple reason that he has been made one through the cultural production of some of his agents of memory. Without ignoring the denials of Milk’s sainthood voiced by some of his most influential agents of memory, I take seriously his cultural canonization and seek to understand its relationship to his sexual embodiment, and to that of many of his admirers and devotees. Milk has been given a sacred body through the deployment of religious cultural forms in his memorialization.

Milk is a saint whose sexuality is not incidental to his identity, but rather essential and integral. His significance for LGBTQ people lies precisely in his having been an assertively ‘out’ gay man, who won a political office that he used to advance the wellbeing of other ‘gay’ people. Milk would otherwise have no significance except as an assassinated city politician, whose memory would then probably be less significant than George Moscone’s (Eyerman 2012:400). The case of Father Mychal Judge, the New York City Fire Department chaplain, who died on September 11, 2001, affords an illuminating comparison. While Judge’s identity as a gay man is important for LGBTQ people, who find in him a heroic gay 9/11 martyr, Judge’s sexuality can be treated as incidental to the context in which he served and gave his life (Cherry 2021b; Daly 2008). Judge could very well achieve official canonization by the Catholic Church, in spite rather than because of his homosexuality. Harvey Milk, in contrast, has achieved queer canonization precisely because of his queer identity.
The relics of a saint

The 2003 GLBT Historical Society ‘Saint Harvey’ exhibit had as its central element a display of the clothing Milk was wearing on the day of his death. Jordy Jones offered a sophisticated meditation on the ways in which Milk’s displayed suit evoked both presence and absence. The suit was empty of Milk’s substantial body. Yet it was displayed in a form that reflected how it appeared when worn on the body. Furthermore, the evident traces of Milk’s blood on the clothing bore witness to the brutal fact that he had been wearing them when his body was penetrated by hollow point shells (Jones 2011). Lillian Faderman characterized the 2003 identification of Milk as ‘Saint Harvey’ as ‘tongue in cheek’ (Faderman 2018:229). However, the transgender historian Susan Stryker, who curated the exhibit, insisted that her intention was quite earnest – to make use of religious cultural forms to express the status accorded to Milk by LGBTQ people. Most strikingly, she displayed Milk’s clothing in a cruciform arrangement, identifying Milk with Christianity’s suffering savior and paradigmatic martyr. In her curatorial statement, Stryker was candid about the fact that her initial intention had been to honor Milk through parodic, ‘camp’ deployment of religious forms, something she believed he would have appreciated, given his known proclivities for self-deprecating humor and clowning. However, she insisted that working with Milk’s personal effects profoundly changed her sense of what she was doing. I quote from the statement (a copy of which she shared with me):

When it fell to me to curate the opening exhibit for our new gallery ... I knew the time had come to build my campy tribute to ‘Saint Harvey.’ But an unexpected thing happened on my way to camp. Working alone in the office late one night, unpacking box after box in search of suitable Milk memorabilia for this show, I came across the bag of Milk’s personal effects sent back from the coroner’s office to his survivors. There were the clothes, bullet-riddled and blood-stained, that he wore at the time of his death. I laid out upon the floor the shoes and socks, the pants and shirt and jacket, and was struck by the palpable absence of Milk’s body. I was struck by the violent power of the homophobic act that had taken that body away. I sat with those clothes for a long time that night. They possess a gravitas that makes campiness difficult.

Stryker further emphasized in her curatorial statement – and in an interview I conducted with her – that she did not impose the language and imagery of sainthood upon Milk. Rather, these elements expressed an existing cultural phenomenon, the ways in which Milk was already being represented by his admirers (Susan Stryker, interview with author, November 8, 2018). The brochure for the exhibit emphasized this fact by stating
that ‘his personal possessions were treated like relics of a saint, lovingly tended and occasionally displayed by a band of friends’ (GLBT Historical Society 2003). With Milk’s death, mementos and keepsakes became the equivalent of ‘relics,’ as Stryker astutely observed.

The current (as of 2021) mode of displaying Milk’s clothing in the GLBT Historical Society Museum on 18th Street in San Francisco is notably different from that of the ‘Saint Harvey’ exhibit of 2003, and thereby effects a different experience of presence and absence. The clothing is displayed flat, only partially unfolded, as if just removed from its storage box. It is behind a mesh screen, obscured to view, except when a button is pushed that turns on a light – as well as a holographic image of Milk’s face, projected onto the museum floor, and the sound of Milk’s voice from his recorded political testament. Milk’s disembodied voice comes to the ears, while the eyes can take in the clothing. This mode of display reminded me of what is typically encountered in museum displays devoted to the Holocaust (Shoah), where personal effects of the murdered are displayed in ways that emphasize their absence; all that remains of a little girl, for example, are her shoes, piled up with many others. The difference, of course, in the case of the Milk display, is the speaking voice, which renders the gay martyr present, addressing the listener across time, inviting them to respond by coming out and giving others hope: ‘You’ve gotta give them hope,’ Harvey says.

Icons of his body

In his art historical study of Byzantine images of the saints, Henry Maguire emphasized the Byzantine Christian conviction that the bodies of their saints ‘were made visible’ through artistic images (Maguire 1996:3). While the belief systems that surround the cultural uses of images of Harvey Milk are obviously different from those of Byzantine Christianity, it is nevertheless the case, on a basic level, that such images have made Harvey Milk’s body visible to those who engage with them. In this section of the article, I will explore some aspects of this engagement in relation to different types of images. My concern is with images of Harvey Milk that are iconic, that exercise an evocative power for the viewer (Morgan 2005:130). An iconic image invites engagement, most immediately and obviously, through visual contact, the gaze, understood as a transactional experience (Morgan 2005:2–5). Some cultural contexts may permit, encourage, or even mandate physical contact, the touch of fingers or the lips to the image, for example. All such modes of engagement enact a relationship between the individual actor and the subject of the iconic image. How this relationship is understood varies across cultural contexts and from individual to
individual. Individual actors may or may not consciously embrace a culturally prescribed mode of engagement. A critic of their disposition might, for example, suggest that someone is simply going through the motions without the proper mental, emotional, or spiritual disposition. Not every image of a significant or respected individual is necessarily iconic in the sense in which I am using that term. Rather, images are iconized, made to function as icons, in order to have an evocative power for the viewer, through the ways in which they are treated, as signifying or evoking consciousness of cultural meanings or generating emotional responses. ‘A body becomes iconic once something is done to it’ (Stapleton and Viselli 2019:36). The same, I assert, holds true for the image of a body.

The construction of Milk as an iconic martyr-saint involved the interpretation of his assassination as anti-gay (homophobic) violence. It was vital for Milk’s devotees that White be understood as acting out of such an animus. An early and striking example of the canonical interpretation of Milk’s death can be found in the January 1979 issue of the feminist journal, Off Our Backs, in which a lesbian/feminist wrote about encountering teenagers in a car in San Francisco shouting anti-gay slurs just two days after Milk’s death and thinking, ‘How could anybody possibly doubt that Harvey Milk was murdered because he was gay?’ She concluded her short reflection as follows:

In her heart, every woman know (sic) why Dan White murdered Harvey Milk and that any man could have done it. It was male normality whose finger was on that trigger; it was woman hatred that was in those bullets. And underneath that controlled, emotionless demeanor, Dan White was probably shouting, ‘You fuckin’ queer, you fuckin’ faggot—you woman!!’ (Kornegger 1979:10)

In this interpretation of Milk’s assassination, he was already an icon – an evocative, signifying image – before his death. The destruction of his body was, therefore, an act of iconoclasm, the destruction of that image, precisely because of what it evoked and signified. With Milk’s death, the destruction of his body, the material things that have remained as foci for devotion (beyond his physical relics, such as his clothing) are various images, which have functioned, therefore, as icons of the icon.

Iconic images of Milk appear in different forms. Lentz’s creation is unambiguously ‘religious’ (in the conventional sense of that term), especially when the image is interpreted through the explanatory text Lentz composed, which made it clear how he wanted the image to be received:

In this icon he holds a candle, keeping vigil himself for the oppressed of the world. He wears a black armband with a pink triangle. This was a Nazi symbol for homosexuals and represents all those who have been tortured or killed because
of cultural fears regarding human sexuality. Their number continues to grow with each passing year, and the compassionate Christ continues to say, ‘As long as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to Me.’ (Lentz n. d.)

For Lentz, Milk was a religious figure, because his life and death for gay dignity served Christ, whom Lentz understood to exist in solidarity with sexual minorities rather than in condemnation and rejection.

In contrast to Lentz’s unambiguously religious Byzantine Christian icon, there are iconic images of Milk that are entirely ‘secular,’ strictly in the sense that they lack any embellishments that reflect religious cultural forms. The best known such image is a photograph taken by Daniel Nicoletta, which was reproduced on the postage stamp issued in Milk’s memory, and which served as the basis for a memorial sculpture installed in San Francisco City Hall. In this image, Milk smiles warmly at the viewer, his face suffused with confidence and a hint of mischief. His tie is askew, caught by a breeze. Milk appears as a likable and accessible figure, who invites the kind of emulation that agents of memory such as Cleve Jones and Harry Britt have encouraged.

Nicoletta, like many photographers, has been zealous in guarding his rights as the creator of the image, and expressed distress when it has been reproduced without his permission, especially in altered forms (Daniel Nicoletta, interview with author, November 24, 2018). But, given the popularity of the photograph, it is not surprising that it has been used in a variety of ways to express particular interpretations of Milk’s status. For example, in a ‘St. Harvey Milk’ image based on Nicoletta’s photograph, which was carried by a member of New York City’s Judson Memorial Church in the June 30, 2019 Queer Liberation March, Milk’s nimbus was creatively and non-traditionally represented with flowers, a queering, perhaps, of the old motif of the martyr’s victory wreath, modeled in turn upon the laurel wreaths awarded to Greek athletes. Milk’s queer sainthood was rendered unambiguous by the text accompanying the image, ‘St. Harvey Milk.’ Nevertheless, this icon was less overtly Christian than Lentz’s creation and carried no additional guiding interpretive text.

Another photograph by Nicoletta appeared in yet another icon, this one produced by a member of the House of All Sinners and Saints congregation in Denver, Colorado, at the request of then-pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber. The artist (who preferred to be named only as ‘Bill’) deployed various elements of traditional Christian iconography to enhance and re-contextualize the photographic image, so that the living Milk of the photograph becomes an after-living saint. As in many traditional Orthodox and Catholic images of martyr-saints, the mode of death was evoked, in this case with the representation of five jagged bullet holes. Behind Milk, San Francisco appeared
as the place of his martyrdom, but it may also have represented a place of afterlife repose – the City by the Bay as instantiation of a heavenly city? (Bolz-Weber 2015:7–8; Bill, interview with author, November 20, 2018).

Of the iconic images of Milk I have treated here, representative of the substantial body of such images that exists, only Lentz’s overtly Christian icon strongly signified Milk’s homosexuality. This was accomplished through two elements. Milk’s identity as a gay man was symbolized by his lavender shirt and the pink triangle armband (the latter an authentic element in the representation, since Milk wore such an armband when he took part in the 1978 San Francisco Gay Freedom Day Parade). His sexuality was also specified in Lentz’s commentary text. In the case of the other images, it might be conceivable that a person unfamiliar with Milk could encounter one of them and fail to grasp that it represented a gay man. In this, the constant reality of queer invisibility asserts itself. The Lentz icon, of course, avoided this to a degree by the inclusion of the symbolic pink triangle armband. But, like any symbol, this one is only effective if the viewer knows the conventional meaning of the sign. Still, even this symbolically mediated indication of Milk’s homosexuality does not automatically invite a viewer to think, in any particular way, if at all, of its behavioral expressions. Viewers of the icon are left to draw their own conclusions about the particular significance of the sexual identification based on their knowledge of Milk’s life derived from other sources. It is to those sources that I now briefly turn.

Harvey Milk’s sexual body

In The Mayor of Castro Street, Randy Shilts left the reader in no doubt that Milk had a powerful sex drive, upon which he frequently acted. However, investigating Shilts’ archived research materials, I found that he still somewhat softened the image of Milk’s sexual vigor, leaving out, for example, the blunt declaration by one of Milk’s closest friends that he ‘tricked a lot.’13 As the novelist Armistead Maupin put it, Harvey Milk was ‘a bawdy and unembarrassed guy – “sex positive,” as we now so tiresomely call it,’ who was ‘part satyr, part Catskill comic’ (Maupin 2009:7). Milk’s rejection of sexual exclusivity and his embrace of the ‘promiscuity’ that was typical of gay male life in centers such as San Francisco in the 1970s was highlighted by Brett Krutzsch in his aggressively iconoclastic treatment of Milk’s commemoration as a martyr. Although Krutzsch unfortunately misconstrued some of the archival data, his overall argument about Milk’s beliefs about sexuality and how he acted upon them was basically valid. Milk was not a forceful advocate of married monogamy (Krutzsch 2019:20, 32–4).14
Krutzsch’s insistence on the illegitimacy of Milk’s invocation by marriage equality activists (including Milk’s protégé, Cleve Jones) because of the attitudes Milk expressed in the 1970s is much less convincing. It ignored the statements and actions by which Milk affirmed deeply committed same-sex relationships and the transformative effects of the AIDS crisis, the latter especially noted by Cleve Jones (Jones 2016:247–8).15

Certainly reflecting the impact of the growing marriage equality movement, the 2008 feature film, Milk (written by Dustin Lance Black and directed by Gus Van Sant), presented a somewhat sanitized image of Milk’s sexuality, but without erasing its existence.16 Indeed, the opening scenes of the film, which introduced Milk and his great love, Scott Smith, portrayed Milk cruising the younger man at the Christopher Street subway station in New York City and ending up in bed with him. This scene, therefore, clearly established Milk’s sexual identity. Later in the film, its most sexually explicit scene showed the beginning of Milk’s relationship with Jack Lira, the lover he took after a bitter break-up with Smith. In this scene, Milk and Lira grappled passionately, naked on Milk’s bed. The film also contextualized Milk’s sexuality within the world of 1970s gay male San Francisco by portraying his young supporters engaging in casual encounters with one another, in particular in a scene showing Cleve Jones engaging in oral-genital sex with Milk’s campaign advisor Dick Pabich in a back room of Milk’s camera store.

Harvey Milk was a sexually active gay man who became a leading activist in the gay rights movement, one of its iconic figures. However, most iconic images of Milk invite little or no reflection on the relationship between his sexuality and his sacralized iconicity as a gay martyr. There is, however, one notable exception to this general phenomenon.

The sex part

On September 17, 1987, as part of an event titled ‘A Mass-in-Protest of Papal Bigotry,’ the San Francisco Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence manifested the ritualized integration of Harvey Milk’s sexual and sacred body through their canonization of the gay martyr as ‘Saint Harvey Milk.’ The challenge of performing an intentionally ‘camp’ veneration of Saint Harvey was exemplified in the canonization ceremony conducted by the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence as the centerpiece of their Mass, which they performed on the day Pope John Paul II visited San Francisco. I would evaluate the rite as a triumph of liturgical camp – precisely because it teetered, like the roller skating drag nun who took part in the ceremony, on the edge of
failure. The effectiveness of the rite as queer liturgy is that it simultaneously honored Harvey Milk as a martyr and as a sexually embodied gay man.

I can discuss this fascinating ceremony only in brief, barely doing justice to it. The ceremonial event (textually identified as ‘liturgy’) consisted of three textually marked parts. Part I centered on ‘the Pope’s confession,’ in which Pope Impious I (played by a lover of one of the Sisters) functioned as a stand-in for Pope John Paul II and admitted his various errors in confession to the presiding Sisters. This first part culminated with the ‘Presentation of Papal Gifts: Cardinal Sanctified Sin’s Exotic Dance Number.’ This was a strip-tease performance, in which a male dancer went from wearing a miter and red robes to a leopard print G-string – a bluntly joyful celebration of gay male gaze of desire and the erotic body in contrast to traditional Catholic teaching about sexuality as upheld by John Paul II and Cardinal Ratzinger. When I discussed the event with Grand Mother Vish-Knew, I commented that I regarded the strip-tease as ‘an important part of the whole ceremony,’ to which he immediately responded affirmatively: ‘the sex part … adding sex!’ (Grand Mother Vish-Knew, interview with the author, October 6, 2018)

Part II of the ceremony, titled ‘Harvey Milk’s Last Election,’ the central element in the ceremony, tightly framed as it was by Parts I and III, began with the ‘Unveiling of His Holy Image,’ the unfurling of a large black and white image of Milk (another of Daniel Nicoletta’s photographs). The image covered over the cross, inscribed with the words, ‘2000 Years of Oppression,’ which had previously been the central visual focus of the ritual. The next element in the liturgy was announced as a ‘Lesson … from the Gospel of St. Randy read by Sr. Marquessa deSade.’ The reading from Randy Shilts’ The Mayor of Castro Street consisted of two contiguous sections from the chapter about the beginning of Milk’s political career. The first section ended, ‘Harvey was now a politician.’ In this section, Milk was quoted as explaining his decision to become a political activist: ‘I’ve got to fight not just for me but for my lover and his next lover eventually. It’s got to be better for them than it was for me.’ The next section focused on a visit by Milk’s old lover, Joe Campbell, who had retreated to Marin County, describing Campbell’s skepticism about Milk’s new political identity and sense of mission. The segment (and the reading) ended with the following:

The only thing Harvey said that made sense to Joe was when Campbell asked Milk why he had established his store at a run-down place like Castro Street. ‘I like to sit in the window and watch the cute boys walk by,’ Harvey said. That sounded like the old Harvey (Shilts 1982:72–3).
Unfortunately, there is no video recording of the end of the reading, which would have preserved the congregation’s reaction. However, to judge by the preserved video footage from the ceremony, there would likely have been knowing laughter. The essential point is that the reading referred to two key facts about Milk: his zeal to make things better through his political activism and his robust sexuality. This punchline to the reading indicated that, in the canonization by the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, Saint Harvey would not, could not, replace the sexual Harvey. Gay sexuality was not incompatible with sainthood within the culture served by the Sisters.

After the reading, the ‘Pontifical Proclaimer’ introduced Sr Species of Crow (also known as Fag Nun Assunta Femia) to deliver a ‘Canonization Oration.’ Unfortunately, this oration was ‘not available at time of printing’ (according to the preserved script) and is only partially preserved in video footage. However, the final words of the oration in this video footage provide a good idea of its form and content:

We ask your blessing and the blessings of your son, our holy horned one, on these holy rituals whereby we solemnize what is in our hearts. A Jewish faggot was murdered and his memory lives on in us. We ask your blessings on the ritualization of this sainthood of one of our many, many martyrs, named and unnamed.

The video footage provides an unambiguous indication of the gathered community’s response to this recitation. A group that had been playfully raucous fell absolutely silent. The only sound in addition to the drag nun’s voice was the ringing of the bells on the San Francisco cable cars just a block away, a sound that enhanced the ritual quality of the moment, in my judgment.

Following the oration, the congregation voted affirmatively on Milk’s canonization, responding to the question: ‘Is or isn’t he worthy of our prayers of petition and veneration?’ Pope Impious I then declared Milk to be a saint. Following this proclamation, the Pontifical Proclaimer announced the ‘Litany for Justice for All,’ which had first been used at the commemoration of ‘the First Anniversary of the Martyrdom of Harvey Milk’ (in 1979) as the ‘closing benediction’ for that event. In this context, it was recited ‘in memory of Harvey and as a prayer of empowerment and healing in these violent and troubled times.’

Part III was a ‘Communion Service’ in which condoms were elevated, consecrated, and distributed as ‘Our Holy Savior.’ Thus, Milk’s canonization as a gay saint was bracketed within affirmations of male homoerotic desire and its condom-protected, health-preserving fulfillment, ritually

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marking him as a saint for a community defined by a vigorously affirmed sexuality in the midst of the AIDS crisis.

**Conclusions**

I do not regard this study as representing the conclusion of a process of research and reflection, but only as a beginning. Therefore, I will conclude it in an open-ended manner. Brett Krutzsch was correct that much of the hagiography of Milk tended to downplay and domesticate his sexuality, frequently in the service of activism for marriage equality. This tendency is not, however, an inevitability. There is another potential direction in which Milk veneration can be taken and sustained. The ritual performed by the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence suggested a different option for the way in which Milk can be affirmed as a queer saint, emphasizing cultural agency on the part (especially, but not exclusively) of gay men. Milk, in this cultural performance, was not a saint in spite of his robustly non-monogamous sexuality and his hostility to organized religion (especially Christianity). Rather, his sainthood integrally included those elements.

The exemplarity of sainthood invites Harvey Milk’s devotees to follow his example. Many agents of memory have focused on Harvey as a role model for activism. But a fuller embrace of Milk’s example could involve placing activism into an integral relationship with an unapologetically joyful embrace of sexual pleasure, in line with the core principles of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, which affirm ‘universal joy’ and reject ‘stigmatic guilt.’ Cleve Jones, in fact, portrayed himself as having lived according to this structure of Milk discipleship in his memoir, which deftly combined accounts of his activism with anecdotes about his romantic and sexual relationships, making it evident that both aspects of his experience constitute his ‘life in the movement.’

No iconic image of Harvey Milk himself is explicitly sexual, inviting an erotic gaze as do the originally private and not-yet-iconized (or, perhaps just barely iconized) images of the youthful naval officer. To conclude this article, as a matter for further reflection, I ask what would happen if such images were fully iconized, deployed, and displayed in ways that encouraged meaningful engagement? Could the gaze of erotic desire and the gaze of reverent admiration coexist and comingle in a hypostatic union, as they have in the cases of other iconic images in gay male culture, such as those of Hadrian’s beloved Antinous and of St Sebastian? My own act of making these images of Harvey Milk’s body (and others like them) the focus of reflection participates in the beginning of a process of iconization.
The images now signify and evoke, if nothing else, questions about their significance.

About the author

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Notes

1 The very first rally and march in honor of Moscone and Milk took place during the evening of the day of their assassinations. Hastily organized, the rally and subsequent march from Harvey Milk’s Castro Street neighborhood to San Francisco City Hall drew thousands of participants. This event is well documented in two biographical books about Harvey Milk (Faderman 2018:218–19; Shilts 1982:279–81) and a documentary film (Epstein and Schmiechen 1984). The march is also effectively and affectingly represented in the feature film Milk (2008), written by Dustin Lance Black and directed by Gus Van Sant.

2 Brother Robert Lentz currently lives as a vowed Franciscan friar in a community in Maryland: https://www.trinitystores.com/artist/br-robert-lentz-ofm. Raised in a Byzantine Catholic family and formally trained in the Byzantine iconographic tradition, he was living as a layperson in San Francisco at the time when he created the Milk icon. The icon can be found on the website of Trinity Stores, which is the sole authorized distributor of Lentz’s large body of iconographic work: https://www.trinitystores.com/artwork/harvey-milk-san-francisco

3 In addition to Milk’s representation as a saint primarily on the basis of Christian iconography, he has also been portrayed as a sacred figure, drawing on elements of Asian (Hindu and Buddhist) iconography, by the American gay artist Carl Grauer, in his series, ‘The Lavender Temple of Their Most Fabulous’: https://www.carlgrauer.com/the-lavender-temple-test

4 I employ ‘queer’ in a common but not uncontested sense as encompassing ‘all sexualities that are not hetero-normative’ (Cregan 2012:152–3). I am sensitive to the fact that many gay, lesbian, and bisexual people eschew the designation because of its violently pejorative origins and continued deployment as a term of abuse, rejecting the possibility of its reclamation and rehabilitation. I also recognize that many transgender individuals understand ‘queer’ to refer to sexuality rather than to gender identity and, therefore, not to include them.

5 It is vital to acknowledge the fraught nature of the Christian claiming and framing of Harvey Milk, a Jew. However, I believe that any critique of this cultural process and the agency of those taking part in it should build upon a clear understanding of the contextual situations and motivations of those cultural actors. Contributing to that understanding is the purpose of this article. It will, therefore, not engage with Jewish critiques of the modes of cultural canonization it explores. That will be the
focus of a future study. Faderman (2018) is the essential starting point for reflection on Milk’s Jewish identity and its significance.

6 For a clear and accessible basic statement on this approach, see Wilcox 2021:13–14.


8 Shilts refers simply to a ‘well-known lesbian university professor’ shouting the slogan without specifying her name. It was almost certainly the activist Sally Miller Gearhart, who had developed a close bond with Milk while working with him against ‘Proposition 6’ (also called the ‘Briggs Initiative’), which would have led to the dismissal of openly gay and lesbian public school teachers as well as their vocal allies. I was unable to interview Gearhart to confirm this fact due to her frail health; she died on July 14, 2021 at the age of 90.

9 A photograph of the banner taken by the photographer Eli Reed can be seen in an online collection of his work: https://art.famsf.org/eli-reed/untitled-standing-figure-gay-love-gay-power-harvey-milk-lives-harvey-milk-candlelight-vigil. The photograph is misdated to 1978; Jones insisted to me that he did not create the banner until 1979.

10 Britt, an atheist who was once a Methodist minister, went on to insist that the label ‘prophet’ was, however, fully appropriate for Milk, likening him to Moses and other Old Testament prophets!

11 On the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence and their relationship to Christianity (as well as other traditions), see Wilcox (2018).

12 In the 1970s, the term ‘gay’ was widely used as an umbrella term for both homosexual men and homosexual women, and even for those who are now referred to as transgender. I employ it here in that sense, in accordance with the usage of Milk and his contemporaries.


14 Krutzsch (2019:182, n. 75) misidentified a letter from Milk to his lover, Scott Smith, as having been written by Smith to Milk, which led him to significantly misinterpret the dynamics of their relationship and Milk’s role in its demise (James C. Hormel LGBTQIA Center, San Francisco Public Library, Harvey Milk–Scott Smith Collection, Box 2, Folder 18).

15 On the day he was sworn in, Milk walked from the Castro neighborhood arm in arm with his lover, Jack Lira, and when other new supervisors were introducing spouses and families, Milk said, ‘It is well known that I’m a gay person, and in this state there is a law that says gay people cannot be married, but there is no law that says two human beings cannot love one another. I have a loved one.’ Footage of Milk’s walk with Lira and his statement inside City Hall can be found in an NBC News archival video: Flashback: Meet San Francisco Supervisor Harvey Milk, YouTube, November 27, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O9jYasWREzE

16 Concern with marriage equality was evident in Black’s acceptance speech for the Best Original Screenplay award at the 2009 Oscars, which Cleve Jones quoted in full (Jones 2016:269–70). A video of the speech can be found on YouTube, posted April 18, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vfPXcCroPlc

I suggest ‘just barely iconized’ because Lillian Faderman (2018) opted to include two of those navy photographs in her biography of Milk, and often deployed one in her public talks about her book, using them to represent Milk in his youth and making them available to a wide audience.

On Antinous, see, e.g., Lear (2015); on St Sebastian, see, e.g., Kaye (1996).

References
Out at St Paul (@outatstpaul) (2018b) Twitter post, November 27. https://twitter.com/outatstpaul/status/1067466464800710656