THE CARING NATION

Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves
as a reparative fantasy

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In February 2013, Swedish author and comedian Jonas Gardell was awarded the prize of 'Homo of the Year' by the Swedish Crown Princess Victoria, who was the first ever member of the royal family to attend the annual QX gay gala. An enthusiastic gala audience welcomed her appearance on the stage with cheers and a standing ovation. In her short award speech, Crown Princess Victoria proclaimed a wish: 'Your message is clear. Straighten your back. Reach out your hand. We shall dry each other's tears. We shall dry each other's tears with open hearts and our bare hands.' With these words, she paraphrased the title of Jonas Gardell's novel and TV drama *Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves*, which for the first time in the Swedish mainstream public sphere addressed the trauma of HIV/AIDS, and for which Gardell was awarded the prize. Accepting the award, Jonas Gardell responded cheekily: 'You may be the Crown Princess, but tonight, I am the Queen' (see figure 12.1). The gala was televised nationally and Princess Victoria's presence was widely publicised (Backlund, 2013a; Engman, 2013a; 2013b; Lagerwall, 2013; TV4, 2014). 'There is no clearer way for the future sovereign of Sweden to show support and affirmation', summarised the chair of Stockholm Pride regarding the widely felt public enthusiasm (Rimsby, 2013).

The 2013 QX gala award ceremony, this chapter suggests, marked a moment whereby what in the 1980s had been addressed as a 'gay plague' was now reframed as a national trauma. When awarding the prize to Jonas Gardell, Crown Princess Victoria enacted an imaginary trauma resolution, symbolically healing past wrongs – the blaming and offending of AIDS victims in the 1980s public discourse on the epidemic, the inhumane treatment of patients, and the subsequent long silence. As the embodiment

Figure 12.1 Swedish Crown Princess Victoria awarded the prize of 'Homo of the Year' to Jonas Gardell at the annual QX gay gala, 4 February 2013.

of the state of Sweden, the Crown Princess retrospectively offered both recognition and care. In the 'we' of the royal speech, the gay community, once regarded as 'not-us', was called upon as one with the nation. At the same time, the nation of 'us' was redefined as a community of compassion, and a historical notion of Swedish welfare state as caring was regenerated. The vulnerability of gay men during the epidemic and their suffering were recognised, the national self-image healed, and a new community of proper feeling envisioned (Berlant, 1999).

GAY EPIC TO NATIONAL EPIC

Released over a year between August 2012 and August 2013, Jonas Gardell's trilogy of novels (2012a; 2013a; 2013b) and a three-part TV drama *Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves* [*Torka aldrig tårar utan handskar*], scripted by Gardell and directed by Simon Kaijser, had immense success in Sweden. When Swedish public service television SVT aired the three-part drama series in October 2012, 1.2 million viewers, a third of the adult population, were seated for the premiere, and #torkaaldrigstårar trended on Twitter. Both the novel – which sold over 100,000 copies – and the TV series received a very favourable public reception and exceptional

media coverage in the national media, crossing over between the high-brow cultural pages and the entertainment sections of tabloids as well as receiving editorial commentary and massive acclaim.¹ In the upcoming months, Jonas Gardell – a national gay celebrity since the 1980s – was given a range of awards: the Swedish TV prize Kristallen for the best TV drama of the year in 2012, the Swede of the Year award 2012 from the weekly politics magazine *Fokus* for ‘reminding us of how human dignity is never a self-evident fact but needs constant defending’, an honorary doctorate in medicine at Linköping University in 2013 for ‘depicting a dark chapter in the Swedish history of medicine’, and the 2013 Bellman Prize from the city of Stockholm for ‘depicting the greatness and the vulnerability, the shortcomings and the radiance of human beings’ (Brevinge, 2012; Karlsson, 2013; Lundgren, 2013).

More than a novel or a television drama, *Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves* is better understood as a media event: a series of works and a serial narrative unfolding and evolving on many media platforms over two years, from August 2012 onwards. As a transtextual event, it comprised not only the three-part novel and television drama but also extensive media publicity in 2012–13 as well as Jonas Gardell's performances in his stage show (*Mitt enda liv*) and national radio and TV programmes (*P1 Sommar*, *Allsång på Skansen*, *En helkväll med Jonas Gardell*). They all recirculated material – lines, events, scenes, and songs – from the novel and the TV drama, amounting to a web of versioning, repetition, and recurrence. The different instances were joined together by Jonas Gardell as an author, performer, and public persona. His status as a celebrated artist in the eyes of the mainstream public as well as the transtextuality entailing both intensity and duration were crucial in making *Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves* a popular success.

The three-part novel and TV drama were received as a long-awaited revisiting of a forgotten traumatic past and enabling a belated but important occasion for public mourning and communicating of the trauma (Caruth and Keenan, 1995). At last, the lives of AIDS victims would be commemorated in Sweden (Butler, 2004; Sturken, 1997; Svensson, 2007; Warburton, 2014; 2016). At last, the homophobic reactions of media and society at large would be recognised and the experiences of repressive state health policies and legislation accounted for. When HIV was in 1983 included under the Infectious Diseases Law, HIV-positive persons were, in the name of public health, obliged to regularly report sexual encounters and partners to a physician. Furthermore, and even today, the HIV disclosure obligation is very strict: as stipulated by Swedish law, people with HIV must disclose their condition to their partners before sex, and they cannot have unprotected sex in any circumstance. Failure to comply can result in a prison sentence,

even if the virus is not transmitted (Kulick, 2005; Thorsén, 2013; Warburton, 2016). Like in the United States and many European countries, in Sweden the introduction of protease inhibitors in 1996 led to a relative silence around HIV/AIDS in the public sphere (Sörberg, 2008). The doctoral thesis by ethnologist Ingeborg Svensson on Swedish AIDS victims' funeral practices was published in 2007, but in the broad public sphere the topic of HIV/AIDS was virtually untouched before Gardell, despite the gay-friendliness and high cultural visibility of LGTBQ issues in Swedish publicity since the mid-1990s (Svensson, 2007; 2013; Warburton, 2014; 2016).² Sweden, unlike many other countries, had no AIDS activist visual media (Juhász, 2006; Sendziuk et al., 2010) which would have raised these issues. In 2012, a documentary called *Infected – When HIV came to Sweden* [*Smittad – när hiv kom till Sverige*] was released and broadcast on primetime television as a follow-up to Gardell's TV drama.

While Gardell's novel did not receive any of the prestigious literary prizes and was criticised for structural or stylistic fallacies by some critics, it was embraced by the most influential cultural journalists and critics as a significant and urgent documentary novel making a forgotten history visible. It was, furthermore, written into the national literary canon through comparisons with well-known epic historical novels. Wilhelm Moberg's tetralogy *The Emigrants* [*Utvandrarna*] (1949–59), about Swedish migration to the United States in the nineteenth century, and Per Anders Fogelström's (1917–1998) series of novels depicting Stockholm from the 1860s onwards (Liljestrand, 2012; Milles, 2013; Utbildningsradion, 2013). The trilogy was hailed as 'witness literature' (Wiman, 2012a), as a 'triumph of political literature' (Guillou, 2013), and a depiction of 'a civilisation process' of the Swedish society (Larsmo, 2013). While welcomed as a 'gay men's national epic' (Brandel, 2012) and 'a loving depiction of gay promiscuity' (Wilson, 2012), the novel was also framed as a mirror image for the general public, calling forth 'pain over what many have experienced and pride over how we in Sweden have progressed' (Ludvigsson, 2012). The mainstream acclaim for *Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves* concluded in 2014 when the readers of the newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* voted it the third 'most significant cultural event' in Sweden since 1964 (Hilton, 2014).³

The public acclaim of both the novel and the TV series evokes the 1990s US reception of Tony Kushner's play *Angels in America* (1991) which has also had many productions in Swedish theatres since the early 1990s. Even if Swedish critics were not 'stumbling over each other in adulatory stupor' to celebrate 'a masterpiece' (Savran, 1995), the broad popular embrace of *Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves* as significant history and an epic for the nation echoes how Kushner's play engaged with the national imagination and worked, in David Savran's (1995) words, to reconstruct the nation

(see also Kekki, 2003). Whereas Kushner's play articulated a Mormonist notion of America as a promised land, Gardell's epic re-narrativised the nation's recent past through Christian language: the general public, in its ignorance and prejudice about the HIV/AIDS epidemic, violates the Great Commandment and ethical rule of loving one's neighbour as oneself. Like Kushner's play, Gardell's epic was accommodated with 'remarkable ease' into the national canon (Kekki, 2003; Savran, 1995: 226) as it turned around the pathologising gaze of the past. While gay men, in public discourse on HIV/AIDS, were excluded from the national 'we' during the epidemic and othered as bearers of 'the new plague', Gardell's epic projects the chosen family of gay friends as the true family which provided the acceptance, support, and care the biological families and the imaginary national family denied. In this manner, the epic – like *Angels in America* – depathologised 'gay men as a class' (Savran, 1995: 227) and, instead, pathologised the national past.

In her study of the politics of remembering and nation-building, Marita Sturken (1997: 14) compares the AIDS epidemic to the Vietnam War, arguing that these two historical moments have profoundly affected cultural memory. In her analysis, they have both disrupted 'previously held popular beliefs about the United States' as well as experiences of nationality. Gardell's epic suggests the same in the case of Sweden, despite a very different historical and political context: that the trauma in Sweden, beyond the epidemic itself, was not about denied access to healthcare or medication, but about social rejection and stigmatisation. The trauma resided in 'the severance from the national body' (Wiegman, 1997: 4; Yingling, 1991; 1994), in being marked as not belonging to the national 'we'. It is this trauma that *Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves* promised to repair.

Beyond addressing a trauma within gay male culture, *Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves* simultaneously engaged in a politics of nation. While enabling mourning work for gay audiences, it attempted to rewrite the national history by projecting the nation's near past of the 1980s as an age of homophobia and intolerance against the contemporary, official self-image of Sweden as 'gay-friendly' (Swedish Institute, 2018). In other words, *Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves* resignified vulnerability, the injury of the HIV/AIDS epidemic on gay men, as a productive resource for the national self-image, thus enabling the integration of gay history into the 'national symbolic' (Berlant, 1991). While issuing a fierce accusation of homophobia against past Swedish society, through processes of resignification and transference, *Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves* reframed the HIV/AIDS-stricken bodies as objects of compassion, restoring the self-image of Sweden as a caring nation – a welfare state and *folkhem*, a people's home.

TESTIMONIAL SPACE: RE-NARRATIVISING THE NATION

In its revisiting of the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s, *Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves* coincided with several US documentary films about AIDS activism (*United in Anger*, 2013; *How to Survive a Plague*, 2012; *Vito*, 2011; *We Were Here*, 2010; *Sex in an Epidemic*, 2010). Instead of commemorating past political and social mobilisation, *Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves*, as a novel and a TV series, foregrounded public mourning over the loss of lives and communities during the HIV/AIDS epidemic by depicting a circle of gay friends: Rasmus, Benjamin, Paul, Seppo, Lars-Åke, Bengt, and Reine. The three-part structure of both the novel and the television drama enacts a tragic trajectory as the first part is subtitled 'love', the second 'illness', and the third 'death'. The narration moves between different temporal layers: the now of narration with a voiceover reminiscing on the past, the childhood of Rasmus and Benjamin, their journey to the circle of gay friends, their romance, Rasmus and other friends falling ill and dying, and Benjamin surviving them as a witness of the era. As an AIDS-narrative, the novel and the TV series echo three decades of literary, cinematic, and televisual representations of the epidemic, the legacies of 'AIDS media' (Hallas, 2009; Román, 2006; 2009; Sendziuk et al., 2010), and what Monica Pearl (2013: 8ff.) has termed the 'legacy of gay grief' (see figure 12.2).

In mobilising a sense of national renewal, the narrative structure of *Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves* played a crucial role. The TV series opens with an extreme close-up of Rasmus's (Adam Pålsson) eyes, conveying

Figure 12.2 Remembering friends and lovers.

a sense of panic and agony. He is in hospital, in pain and undergoing treatment. This opening scene introduces the viewers to the prototypical imagery of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, showing 'emaciated gay men in hospital beds' (Hallas, 2009: 12). An object of intense debate since the early years of the epidemic, these deathbed images have been fiercely criticised for sustaining 'stigmatizing ideological narratives about homosexuality's "innate pathology"', instead of persuading 'readers to demand a greater political and medical response to the AIDS crisis' (Crimp, 2002; Hallas, 2009: 12; Treichler, 1988; Watney, 1987; 1996). Nevertheless, the opening shot also has a particular narrative function. As Rasmus's eyes look straight into the camera, they serve as an injunction to the viewer: you are seeing this, and you are hailed as a witness.

With its narrative structure, *Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves* invites its viewers into what Roger Hallas has termed an 'intersubjective space of testimony' (Hallas, 2009). Documentary footage is used to enhance a sense of historical accuracy. Each episode features a title sequence in which documentary footage of everyday life in Stockholm is mixed with dramatic scenes from the television drama. On the soundtrack, an omniscient voiceover narrator (Björn Kjellman) addresses the viewer: 'The story you are about to see is true. And it happened here. In this city.' These pregnant words and the injunction to remember are repeated at the beginning of each episode, and they also reoccur throughout the three-part novel. The voiceover narrator is curiously ambivalent. He is anonymous in the openings of the first and the third episode, describing the diegetic events as an omniscient narrator: 'It was like a war fought in peacetime. In a city where most people went on as if nothing had happened, young men fell ill. They grew emaciated, withered away, and died.' In the second episode, however, the narrator identifies himself as Benjamin: 'We were like a family ... Paul, Bengt, Reine, me and Rasmus, Lars-Åke and Seppo. We'd spend Christmas at Paul's place. That's where Rasmus and I met.' Here, Benjamin reframes himself in the testimonial space as a witness to the epidemic and a survivor: 'We were so young. We loved each other so very much. And that's when this sickness came to our city. "The new plague", the papers called it.' In the third episode, the omniscient narrator enters the image track, becoming a protagonist who through first-person address embodies the remembrance. Visiting Rasmus's grave he recounts the tale of the 'plague' to a relative, a closeted gay man, recalling Rasmus's 'two years of sheer hell' entailing mistreatment and denied benefits as well as being 'met with contempt everywhere'. In this scene, he becomes a representative of those who survived: thanks to inhibitor drugs, 'eventually, you thought that you just might live', while having difficulty to accept 'that you weren't going to die'.

The narration in the TV series operates in two registers. On the one hand, the voiceover frames the story as retrospection and a historical exposé. Short sequences using documentary footage and voiceover step out of the lives of Benjamin, Rasmus, and their friends to inform the viewer about gay culture in Stockholm.⁴ In the novel, even more distinctively, the fiction is punctuated by factual, essay-like sections where the omniscient narrator informs the reader about the history of the Swedish gay movement, gay life and press in the 1980s, attitudes towards homosexuality in Sweden and elsewhere, media coverage of HIV/AIDS, state policies, politicians' reactions, and changes in legislation. Through these passages, the lives of Benjamin, Rasmus, and their friends are explicitly framed as representative of larger histories.

On the other hand, the narration of *Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves* engages the viewer in emotional turmoil by contrasting scenes of happiness, lust, romance, and community with powerful, stereotypical imagery of 'AIDS victims.' With a flashback structure, whereby Benjamin (Adam Lundgren) is first met when sitting by the deathbed of Rasmus, the narration constantly cuts between the pre-epidemic happiness and the present loss, showing the devastating effects of the epidemic on the circle of friends. As a recurrent shock image (see figure 12.3), the title sequence of the series features a close-up of a zip-up plastic body bag with the sign 'bio-hazard' [smittorisk], another key trope of representations of 'AIDS victims' (Watney, 1987: 80). In this 'spectacle of AIDS', as Simon Watney argued in 1987, homosexual male bodies are identified with death: 'the homosexual

Figure 12.3 The spectacle of AIDS.

body', he argued, 'must be publicly seen to be humiliated, thrown around in zip-up plastic bags, fumigated, denied burial, lest there be any acknowledgement of the slightest sense of *loss*' (Watney, 1987: 80).

The readers and viewers of *Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves* are addressed in the second person and called upon to perceive themselves as witnesses (Hallas, 2009: 9–10). Through engagement with the epic, the general public is offered an opportunity to look back to see and acknowledge the lives and losses that passed unmarked thirty years earlier. As a testimonial space, fiction thus enabled a re-enactment of the original trauma, functioning as a mode of affective historiography (Koivunen, 2016) and foregrounding felt connection and a sensory dimension of conceptualising the past. Feelings of fear, anger, and grief were reframed as a concern for a national collective, and indeed both social media and other public commentaries celebrated the television drama for 'tearful viewing' (e.g. Gentile, 2012; Hagström, 2012; Roos, 2012).

As discussed by Roger Hallas (2009), testimony is a relational act that, psychoanalytically speaking, effects a transference between the witness and the listeners. To receive a witness account entails becoming a secondary witness, but it also entails becoming affected, undergoing a transformation: 'The witness begins to come to terms with the event, to truly experience it for the first time, while the listener shares the burden and, with it, the responsibility to participate in the struggle produced by the experience of the event' (Hallas, 2009: 12–13). While Hallas focuses on queer AIDS media and experimental film and video, his description of transference in testimony points to a more general logic. In the case of *Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves*, the broad popular embrace testifies to a smooth and successful process of transference: the burden that was imaginarily transferred was not rejected but accepted with enthusiasm. In this affective historiography, gay and national histories were rewritten through one another, resulting in a reparative fantasy for both.

AUTHORITATIVE WITNESSING: JONAS GARDELL

The affective effect of a public testimony, in Hallas's reading, depends on the coincidence of two corporeal presences: a person who was physically present at the event and who is physically present at the moment of testimony: 'the alignment of these two corporeal presences in the singular body of the testifying witness provides the necessary enunciative condition for the listener to sense – both cognitively and affectively – the magnitude of the event' (Hallas, 2009: 11). In the case of *Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves*, the key element defining this corporeal presence was the author

and scriptwriter Jonas Gardell, particularly considering his long-term star status. For the re-narrativisation of the HIV/AIDS epidemic as a national trauma, Gardell mobilised his whole public persona as well as his signature modes of sentimentality, melodrama, and Christian language.

In the many interviews Gardell gave in 2012–13, he recurrently called himself a witness (Brandel, 2012; Brevinge, 2012; Engström, 2012; Gustavsson, 2012; Henriksson, 2013a; 2013b; Öhrman, 2012; Torén-Björling, 2012). 'I was there, it was my time, my city, and I am a writer. It is my obligation to write, a kind of honorary task', he stated (Torén-Björling, 2012). He repeated how the story, despite its fictive characters, drew on true events and experiences shared by him and his friends. In these interviews, he told over and again that everything in the books was true, that the events, insults, and injuries happened – and he knew it, beyond extensive research, because he was there and he survived (Brandel, 2012). He placed himself in the scenes of his novels – for example, he described hanging around Norra Klara kyrkogata as a fourteen-year-old, 'where the difference between pickup and prostitution was fluid' (Brandel, 2012).

While Jonas Gardell never appears on-screen in the diegetic space of *Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves*, nor is he the omniscient voiceover narrator of the novel, in the broad transtextual event the narrator of his novels and his public persona converge. First, it is Gardell's hypervisibility in the Swedish mainstream media since the mid-1980s that gives him the position of authoritative witness – as someone having been there – and someone bearing witness – testifying in the present moment. Second, while not autobiographical, *Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves* reiterates many familiar themes of Gardell's writing and stage performances since the late 1980s: growing up as a queer child in a religious home, being harassed at school, bearing social stigma, and experiencing and living with the threat of violence. These topics as well as the use of the autobiographical self are the very core of Gardell's oeuvre. Third, in interviews on *Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves*, Gardell often speaks with the lines of his novels, citing them, and in discussing the HIV/AIDS epidemic and gay history he puts himself in the scene by speaking in the name of a 'we' (Gardell, 2013c). As an effect, Gardell recalls the omniscient narrator of his novel and the TV series, instructing the reader, listing names and providing references.

Furthermore, a year after the television drama Gardell upgraded his role as the embodied storyteller and survivor-witness with his new stage show *My Only Life* [*Mitt enda liv*], whose title reiterated a song from Paul's funeral in the concluding episode of the TV series. In this scene, an AIDS funeral is turned into a celebration of life, with lyrics confirming the lived life as a choice ('My one life. The only life I'm going to get. The only life I've ever wanted. My one life'), and the staging of the song as a joyous spectacle,

a celebration of the chosen family and a sense of gay community (Backlund, 2013b). The aesthetics of the number recall a Pride parade, featuring a crowd, dancing, and drag queens. This number reframed the HIV/AIDS epidemic as a story about life rather than death, and was performed by Gardell as a music number in several TV programmes (*Allsång på Skansen*, 2013; *En helkväll med Jonas Gardell*, 2013). The stage show *My Only Life*, which premiered in Stockholm in October 2013, was sold out for two years, toured around the country, and was also broadcast on national network television. In this performance, Gardell explicitly inserted himself into the narrative of *Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves*. Using background projections from the TV footage and a first-person narrative ('my life'), he presented himself as a witness and survivor, the show concluding with the anthem from the television series.⁵

Important for Gardell's functioning as an authoritative witness was his long-term status as a national gay celebrity, and a face for both gay marriage and gay parenting. He himself commented upon his particular role as a 'domesticated' gay man, embraced by the straight mainstream rather than the gay subculture (Voss, 2007). When awarded the prize of 'Homo of the Year' in 2012, the jury praised Gardell for succeeding in making 'the average Swede understand and embrace the thought that homosexuality too is an ingredient of the Land of Mellanmjölk'. The notion of 'the Land of Mellanmjölk [Middle Milk]' refers to a joking self-image of Swedes, describing themselves as being average, 'in the middle', and anxiously not too much of anything, including fat in milk. In other words, Gardell was praised for his integrationist politics and mainstreaming homosexuality (cf. Warner, 1999).

Thanks to this exceptional status as 'gay of the nation' [*riksbög*], Gardell was, in his many stage performances and *My Only Life* [*Mitt enda liv*], also able to present himself as an embodiment and representative of Sweden. Proclaiming 'I am Sweden' or referring to his family as 'It is us who are Sweden', he explicitly took issue with the right-wing populist Sweden Democrats' attempt to hijack nationalist language and imagery. His defiant and bold gestures echoed the rebellious and jubilant rhetoric of the Queer Manifesto – 'We're Here. We're Queer. Get Used to It' – but also of the Queer Nation as a project of 'new nationality' which attempted to reoccupy 'the space of national legitimation' (Berlant and Freeman, 1992: 170).

TIME OF AFFECT, TIME OF NATION

Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves reframed the 1980s HIV/AIDS epidemic not only figuratively but also in a more literal sense, as Gardell

returned to his own writing of the 1980s. He had indirectly thematised the epidemic in his debut novel *Passion Play* [*Passionspelet*] (1985), featuring a religious framing, and the main characters of *Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves*, Rasmus and Benjamin, were already there in his TV play *Tenderness* [*Ömheten*], along with a number of key dialogues. Significantly, the play – originally broadcast by national public service television SVT in 1989 and produced for stage in 2012 following the success of *Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves* (Aschenbrenner, 2012; Håkansson, 2012; Waaranperä, 2012) – was very different in its mode and aesthetics: an intimate chamber play and a family drama with a focus on homophobia and HIV/AIDS as a social problem. When versioned in 2012 for *Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves*, the core plot of the play was reframed as a question of national trauma.

Both versions have a flashback structure that focuses on Rasmus dying of AIDS in hospital in 1989, with his lover Benjamin by his bedside and his parents visiting. What was additionally preserved for 2012 is the charged dialogue between Benjamin and Rasmus's parents: Rasmus's parents deny Benjamin the presence at his funeral, rejecting him and proclaiming 'You don't belong to the family'. Beyond this, the two versions of Rasmus and Benjamin are very different. While in *Tenderness* we meet an ordinary gay couple, an un-dramatic everydayness framing the dramatic illness, in *Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves* the gay characters are cast as melodramatic virtuous victims: gorgeous young men who wanted to love, who – to quote the rhetoric of the series – had 'such capacity to love' but who faced death.

The melodramatic tone in 2012 is further emphasised by the ways in which Rasmus's and Benjamin's biological families treat them. Benjamin's parents are Jehovah's Witnesses who reject their son once he comes out as gay. Whereas in the 1989 television play Rasmus's parents react to the knowledge of their son being ill with frustration – 'first you ask us to be tolerant, to accept and to respect the demands of gay rights movement, and now this' – in the 2012 version the parents are depicted as lacking empathy. This withholding of compassion (Berlant, 2004) is further emphasised as a significant symbolic gesture, as the hospital personnel are singled out as refusing a human touch. The title of the series is explained in the introductory scene of the first episode as an explicit warning of one nurse to another: 'don't ever wipe tears without gloves'. The drama opens with denying or withholding compassion, signalled by both the parents' reactions and the hospital personnel's isolation routines.⁶ In 1989 the gay couple lives in social isolation, but in 2012 Rasmus and Benjamin are depicted as surrounded by their chosen family of gay friends and a vibrant gay community. In other words, the contrasting of the chosen family against societal abandon that is crucial to the narrative of *Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves* is notably absent in *Tenderness*.

In reframing the 1989 drama of parental betrayal into an exposé of the nation's past mentality and lack of empathy, *Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves* invokes a community of feeling (Berlant, 2008). It establishes a particular sense of time – a time of affect beyond history in a conventional sense. The temporal distance that enables historicising the epidemic and returning to the past trauma in the first place is disavowed, and the repetition of betrayal appears as an original wound, as if of a different temporal order. The time of affect – a synchronic time – is the homogeneous, empty time of the nation described by Benjamin Anderson (1993) in his famous reading of Walter Benjamin. In this time or timelessness of affect, the viewers of the 2012 TV series as secondary witnesses are invited to revisit and share the trauma, the previously unrecognised loss. The synchronic time of affect as a mode of affective historiography enables a transference and reframing of the narrative about AIDS trauma as one about the nation.

And it is this trauma that is resolved in the scene where Jonas Gardell was crowned as the 'Homo of the Year' by the Swedish Crown Princess. In that moment, the community of compassionate viewers constructed by *Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves* coincided with the idea of Sweden as a nation, and the national self-image was reformed. If the TV series in its first episode introduced the narrative as a war drama – 'It was like a war that was fought in a time of peace' – it took six months for the drama to be crowned as a national narrative, and the AIDS victims recognised as soldiers of a nation, fighting for love but killed in action (Gould, 2002).

The war metaphor in *Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves* and the idea of AIDS victims as veterans associate with the US discussions of the HIV/AIDS epidemic as a national trauma comparable to the Vietnam War (Sturken, 1997). However, in Sweden the metaphors are not anchored in any contemporary or recent war experiences. Rather, they are a part of Gardell's melodramatic pathos: an invitation for the witness-viewer to feel sympathy for virtuous victims. In *Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves*, HIV/AIDS epidemic reads not only as a war but also a destruction of innocence. In the final scene of the television drama, the aged Benjamin is sitting at a café by Kungsträdgården and on the soundtrack we hear his internal monologue: 'And they were those who loved the most. Those who were obsessed with love. They were the ones who fell to the frost.' On the image track we see a flashback, private memory or a fantasy of afterlife: slow-motion images of the 'family', the circle of gay friends, enjoying the blossoming of cherry trees in that very same place, Kungsträdgården: 'There are cracks in my foundation, though. Sometimes, I'm on the verge of collapse when I think of Rasmus and the others. The ones who faded away. Somehow I'm only half a person without them.'

This rhetoric of 'early frost' – echoing the title of the first US AIDS drama *An Early Frost* (John Erman) from 1985 – and of victims as 'those who loved

the most' equates loving with being killed in action. When described as young, beautiful, and innocent, Rasmus and the other characters are portrayed, in classic melodramatic manner, as virtuous victims or victim-heroes (Williams, 1998: 42, 66). In the melodramatic imagination, suffering signifies virtue and 'instances of weakness and vulnerability', 'emblematic of their moral goodness' (Williams, 1998: 54). In *Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves*, the omniscient narrator serves as a witness, asserting the virtue.

In Gardell's epic, furthermore, the depiction of vulnerability as a virtue draws on Christian morality underlying the notion of the nation as a community of compassion. The very title of *Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves* echoes a Bible quote cited by Benjamin in the first and the last episodes of the TV series. In the Revelation of St. John, it is God who is doing the wiping: 'God shall wipe all tears from their eyes. There shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain. For the former things are passed away.' Benjamin first cites this Bible quote at Paul's Christmas dinner when meeting Rasmus for the first time. In the TV drama, the quote is followed by a cut to the frame narrative – Benjamin waking by Rasmus's death bed at the hospital – and a repetition of the quote. In this way, the hospital personnel's treatment of AIDS patients, the biological families' rejection of their gay lives, and the homophobic reactions of the general public are framed as violations of Christian morality. At the same time, the Bible quote and the Jehovah's Witnesses' image of an afterlife are removed from their homophobic uses and resignified as affirmative of the gay community (see figures 12.4 and 12.5).

Figure 12.4 Jehovah's Witnesses' image of an afterlife.

Figure 12.5 Paul's funeral.

Both the *My Only Life* number and the final scene in Kungsträdgården with cherry blossoms enact a Christian dream of redemption for queer subjects – celebration in life, turning of shame into pride – as well as the nation, provided that ‘we all wipe each other’s tears without gloves.’ This temporal structure, featuring a time of affect, an empty time of nation, and a futurity in an afterlife, confirms the overall re-narrativisation of the HIV/AIDS epidemic: while focusing on dying and death, such a history concludes and invests in life. Writing history as something that enables futurity is a familiar move in recent queer politics, as described by Jasbir Puar in her discussion of homonationalism – the role of gay-friendliness in the construction of contemporary nation-states and discourses of citizenship (Puar, 2013).

LIMITS OF MOURNING

In 1989, Douglas Crimp famously described the activist response to AIDS as ambivalently torn between mourning and militancy. A similar tension between grief and defiance can be detected in the reframing of the HIV/AIDS epidemic twenty years later with *Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves*. There is a militancy in Jonas Gardell's interviews where he stubbornly voices the injuries of the past as well as in the accusations explicitly presented by the omniscient narrator in his novel:

It happened here. Those doctors, journalists, editors in chief, editorial writers, politicians, policemen, priests, lawyers, and civil servants were guilty of this

abuse – not one of them has ever been held accountable for the suffering and despair they incurred on an already marginalised group. (Gardell, 2013a: 58)

The Swedish Green party Miljöpartiet (2012) responded to this accusatory rhetoric by proposing that the Swedish government would issue an official apology to gay men who were offended, blamed, and treated with disrespect by the Swedish society during the epidemic. While this issue was raised by the prime minister with explicit reference to Gardell's epic, no official process or public debate ensued (Marmorstein, 2012), and Gardell himself declined to enter into discussions about apologies (Gardell, 2013d).⁷ An apology may, as Sara Ahmed (2004) has argued, be just a speech act that, instead of opening dialogues, stops the conversation.

In many interviews, Gardell made wry comments about his own popularity. While using his exceptional access to the public sphere to promote his issues and projects, he simultaneously pointed out the conditions and limits of mainstream acceptance and tolerance (see also Warner, 1999). With the HIV/AIDS epidemic the sense of liberation of the early gay movement was lost, with promiscuity outlawed and gay bathhouses prohibited by law in 1987. Instead, homosexuals were included in the cohabitation law in 1988, and the Registered Partnership Act was passed in 1995, offering acceptance through assimilation into the straight mainstream (Rydström, 2016).

When inviting its viewers and readers into a mourning work, a testimonial space and a community of feeling (Berlant, 2008), *Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves* disavowed the militancy and institutional critique. Focusing on the denial of human touch by the nurses, the epic bracketed the state policies that defined gayness as an illness in Sweden during the epidemic, demolishing the victories of the gay liberation movement by then. As a drama about a lack of compassion and a crisis of basic humanity, instead of a critique of institutions or still-existing policies, *Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves* and its reception redefined the nation around vulnerability. LGBTQ issues were mobilised to build an image of a compassionate, caring nation, and hence to revitalise a sense of the welfare state.

The 2013 QX gala award ceremony reads as a peak moment of an invitation to mourning and a process of imaginary trauma resolution. It became a public memorial and monument (Sturken, 1997) to the lives lost and devalued, now retrospectively honoured and, in an imaginary gesture of rehabilitation, incorporated by the royal family into the national 'we'. In that moment, it seemed as if *Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves* had enabled the gay community to publicly mourn the victims of AIDS, to revisit the injuries of the epidemic, and to narrativise gay life in 1980s Stockholm.⁸ At the same time, through a process of transference and healing, the transmedial epic of *Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves* had also engendered a new,

'healthier' nation that no longer ignored or repressed its past and the violence and exclusions it was founded on (Cvetkovich, 2003: 119).

The exclusion was however brought up by some critical voices (Edenheim, 2012a; 2012b; 2013; Warburton, 2014) and Gardell himself. The celebration of the nation as a caring community, engendered by *Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves*, coincided with another kind of nationalism, more concerned with how to delimit the scope of compassion. In 2013, the Swedish Migration Board responded to the escalation of the Syrian crisis by granting permanent residence to all Syrian asylum seekers, and in August 2014, Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt gave a famous speech in which he urged Swedes to 'open their hearts' to refugees seeking shelter. In September 2014, however, the right-centre government lost the election and Sweden Democrats, with their anti-immigration and anti-Islam agenda, changed the Swedish political landscape.

In 2012, Gardell was active in articulating the limits of the narrative of the caring, compassionate nation. Together with another LGBTQ activist and two high-profile politicians, Gardell published an appeal to grant a residence permit to an HIV-positive gay man from Uganda (Gardell et al., 2012). With 'Let us wipe Karim's tears,' Gardell and his companions highlighted the paradox of increasing LGBTQ rights in Sweden and an accelerating amount of threats, injuries, and hate in many parts of the world, including Russia, Belarus, Hungary, Iran, Iraq, and many African countries. Significantly, both this call for testing the limits of compassion as well as Gardell's militancy regarding the domestication of gay life were ignored in the public embrace of *Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves* and the focus on the shared national trauma and reinvention of the caring nation.

NOTES

- 1 For positive or even rave reviews see Folkhammar (2012), Helgeson (2012), Liljestrand (2012), Svensson (2012), and Wilson (2012). For editorial page commentary on the relevance of the series, see Franchell (2012), Ludvigsson (2012), and Kjöllér (2012). For a cultural pages debate about identity politics see Edenheim (2012a; 2012b; 2013), Gardell (2012b), Hilton (2013a; 2013b), Nordenhök (2012), and Wiman (2012b), and a friendly exchange between Gardell and a critic (Gardell and Hilton, 2013). For tabloid publicity see Fårsjö (2012), Fjellborg (2012), Lindberg (2012), Lundberg (2012a), Schulman (2012), and Virtanen (2012).
- 2 In his preface to a reprint of her dissertation, Gardell (2013c) refers to his epic as a fictionalisation of Svensson's research.
- 3 *Pippi Longstocking* being number one, and classic 1973 children's TV programme *Fem myror är fler än fem elefanter* second.
- 4 Croneman (2012) described the TV series as a 'guided tour in the gay mileus of the 1980s'.

- 5 Many of these narrative tropes were also reiterated in a 2016 episode of prime-time talk show *Min Sanning* (2016), in which Jonas Gardell was interviewed to tell 'his truth'.
- 6 For protests against this framing of hospital personnel as inhumane see Kjöllér (2012).
- 7 Gardell's rhetoric in interviews, novels, and public writings of 'how editors-in-chief, priests and doctors incited hate against the diseased' (Gardell, 2012c; 2013d) caused no major discussions and provoked only few responses by journalists (Kjöllér, 2012; Nycander, 2013) and the responsible medical authorities (Britton, 2012; 2013). Professor of infectious diseases Sven Britton argued the Swedish government acted responsibly in the 1980s, but even he regrets the forced isolation of AIDS patients, in particular young female prostitutes and drug users.
- 8 For gay readings of Gardell's epic, see Brandel (2012), Folkhammar (2013), Hilton (2014), Öhrman (2012), Voss (2013), and Wilson (2012).

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TV AND RADIO

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