

DESPAIR BECAUSE OF IT: REPRESENTING GAY  
SODALITY, CULTURAL TRAUMA AND HIV/AIDS IN  
LARRY KRAMER AND ANDREW HOLLERAN

by

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The following work is an effort to describe the literary output of writers Andrew Holleran and Larry Kramer produced before, during and after the HIV/AIDS epidemic. How these authors describe gay sodality, that is, the culture makeup and practices of gay men as a community, varies as their literature encounters cultural trauma. In analyzing how the thematic body of their work shifts across a linear timeline, I argue Kramer and Holleran comparatively construct another sense of gay sodality in the experienced engagement with their texts along with the particular qualities of how these sodalities operate.

Utilizing queer theory in sociological and literary studies, this thesis aims to closely evaluate the text of *Dancer from the Dance*, *Faggots*, *The Beauty of Men*, *Grief* and *The Normal Heart* to understand how representations of gay sodality characterize a formation of identity.

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## Introduction: April 21, 19985

It is the evening of April 21, 1985 in New York City. Thousands of gay men are dead, and by the end of the year the death toll will rise to a staggering five thousand, six hundred and thirty-six. Acting President of the United States Ronald Reagan has still not said the words “HIV/AIDS” out loud -- he won’t until September when pressed by a reporter on the matter. There is an air of both confusion and rage in Lower Manhattan where less than two decades earlier and four fifths of a mile away from the Public Theater where this evening takes place, the foundations of a gay liberation movement had been laid at the now historic Stonewall Inn. The Stonewall Riots were only one of many events in which queer people -- particularly trans women -- could pronounce political devotion to sexual liberation that developed with initiatives like the Campaign Against Moral Persecution, the Gay Liberation Front and the Lavender Menace, among others. But it is 1985 now and the open sexual expression formerly animating gay men into action has become synonymous with death. The gay liberation movement is only in its teenage years, but at the Public Theater on this evening, it is being publicly interrogated and mourned.

It is on this night in 1985 Larry Kramer’s *The Normal Heart* opens. Another incendiary effort from a novelist and playwright who courted outrage with his 1978 *Faggots* and within his own activism as a founder of Gay Men’s Health Crisis, the semi-autobiographical play depicts a league of men helplessly toiling to solidify some sort of pushback against HIV/AIDS in the face of social apathy and government inaction. In *Faggots*, Kramer played gay culture as an instrument for satire but with *The Normal Heart* and its sequel, *The Destiny of Me*, that culture manifests as something of

a black hole; a swirling void that only destroys, turns men against one another and leaves absolute death in its wake. It is a characteristically political and polemic piece of art for Kramer that demands its audience to accept its argument or sit on a side of history he describes as dangerous, deadly and amoral. The play's commentary on the makeup of gay mores, the shared practices and behaviors, rituals and rites of gay men in this sense, aims to convince that social apathy, sexual expression and non-monogamous behavior is just as harmful as HIV/AIDS. By the time *The Destiny of Me* debuts seven years later, the pain and dejection inflicted by gay culture has become all-consuming in Kramer's depiction of a contemporary queer landscape. There is nothing left, he argues, we have wholly eaten ourselves. The world is ending.

That night in 1985 is an essential one in the construction of a gay literary response to the HIV/AIDS crisis. Kramer was only one of the hundreds of thousands of men in the late twentieth century to find their reality disrupted by the sudden emergence of an inexplicable and seemingly unstoppable disease that wrenched young, healthy men from their youth and into what Kramer in particular outlines as an inescapable pit of illness, fear and death. In 1985, gay men, queer men, men who have sex with men and transgender women, particularly members of these populations in unwealthy socioeconomic classes, were disproportionately affected by HIV/AIDS (AVERT). This percentile is dramatically lower than it was in 1985, or even 1981 when the phenomena was still labeled "GRID" for Gay Related Immune Deficiency, and then even before that in 1980 when there was simply no name for it all. There was no name, no medication and no attention turned towards its rapidly accelerating presence beginning to appear in gay cultures across America. All the same, culturally speaking, HIV/AIDS

was labeled a gay disease for much of its early existence and carries that connotation to this date.

April 21, 1985 marks the emergence of a tradition wherein established gay and queer authors began publicly reconciling with gay sodality as it pertains to HIV/AIDS. Sodality describes the culture gay men create, and for authors like Kramer and Andrew Holleran, among a great deal of other writers – Mishima Yukio, Alan Hollinghurst, Edmund White, the list truly goes on – gay sodality and identification stands as a major conflict present in their work, whether it be in Mishima’s *Forbidden Colors* in which a Japanese man fights to understand himself as gay or Hollinghurst’s *The Spell* where white, English men are thrown into conflict by the perils of gay mores. The particular phrase ‘sodality’ appears in the work of Christopher Nealon, where he writes in *Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion Before Stonewall*, describing the role of physique magazines in a queer context: “There is an additional significance to the equation of male homosexuality with male sociability: to locate male homosexuality in the interstices of the social body... is to pluralize homosexuality - to prevent it from being understood as a sexuality belonging to a single person” (102). He is, of course, referring to a culture that was only beginning to label and identify itself and its specific qualities; yet all the same, as he relates this notion to the precise term ‘sodality,’ I can assert my own understanding of the term. From a roundtable discussion “Theorizing Queer Temporalities,” Nealon explains the process of writing *Foundlings*:

I became interested in the ways that lesbian and gay writers who lived before the time of a social movement were dreaming of collectivities.... I was struck by the strangeness of witnessing that dreamed-of collectivity realized long after the

fact, in the archive: a history of mutually isolated individuals, dreaming similar dreams, arrayed before me in the aftermath of collective struggles and new identities. This two-part sense of queer sodality—fluid in the present, expectant in the past—led me to write about... both those earlier dreams of belonging to ‘History’ and the feeling a latter-day queer subject might have reading the archive of those dreams. (179 - 180)

For Nealon, a queer sodality, especially as it functions over the broad timeline that is queer history, represents a record of men reacting to their own emotional identity and the possibility of what it can become.

The qualities Nealon describes here work for the definition I will use from this point forward: gay sodality is culture constructed within queer interaction, communal emotion and group experience that contains men who identify as gay or queer as its members. Within sodality, mores describes the aforementioned qualities, rituals and behaviors that comprise the sodality itself. Over the course of this thesis, I will argue Kramer and Holleran characterize gay sodality as an agent capable of action, often harming and confronting the identities of its members through trauma. I will also argue, however, that this construction can create its own sodality in two distinct ways: one, through engagement in and experience of the texts’ rhetoric, and two, through the evocation of queer tradition and aesthetic.

Keeping this in mind, as HIV/AIDS began to seep into the corners of gay living, Kramer and Holleran found their bodies of work transitioning from something simultaneously enchanted and overwhelmed by gay sodality into a force utterly terrified of it. This development contains inside it much of the means in which both authors



characterize sodality as an operating agent and how eventually those characterizations build their own sodality. While Kramer had spent a significant portion of his career mining the intricacies and practices of homosexual male life for darkly satirical material, the almost humorous edge of fear that previously scratched the surface of *Faggots* slashes the very skin of his duology of plays and then gouges the face of his revisionist history novel, *The American People Volume I: Search for My Heart*. In the same manner, Holleran's sense of self-deprecation mutates into egregious self-loathing that warps the flesh of his later novel, *The Beauty of Men*. His most recent novel, *Grief*, represents the ultimate conclusion of this loathing and trauma, displaying a defeatist mentality that pulls on camp and queer aesthetic to reconcile with its own disconsolate tone. Both Kramer and Holleran's thematic concern for gayness as a culture feels pressure in their response to HIV/AIDS and the fingerprints on identity it leaves.

Aside from shared interests in gay sodality and the aftershocks of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, Holleran and Kramer have both been tirelessly linked as prominent figures in the larger genre of gay men's fiction and literature. Gay men's literature is a term that has been obsessively defined, redefined and objected to by academics since its loose conception in the early seventies. As Mark Lilly writes in his introduction to *Gay Men's Literature in the Twentieth Century*, scholars remain hesitant to codify gay literature as a certain form on the grounds that it defies the qualities and practices of literary criticism:

minority studies are seen as political in the sense that they seek to destabilise and discredit mainstream assumptions about culture and value... the traditional criteria of literary excellence are seen to be under threat from minority studies.

Novels and poems which, under the old dispensation, would not have been considered (to put it baldly) good enough to be studied, are now being allowed onto syllabuses because of fashion. (XIII)

Although this description reads as somewhat outdated in a contemporary critical environment, the argument that queer texts have suffered indifference within the confines of traditional academia almost certainly apply to the Kramer and Holleran. In an article for *Paper Magazine*, Kramer calls Holleran “our Fitzgerald and Hemingway but for one thing: he writes better than both of him.” He goes on, “If he were straight, his reputation would be immense... But straights have not read him and appreciated him and rushed to read any of his beautifully written work. Straight people don't really want to discover us and who we are” (Kramer, “Times”). There is a certain remoteness in the boundaries between the reception of these authors’ work and the actual thematic upshot of that work.

When Kramer assesses the reception of his own oeuvre, he relies on relating the idea of communal identity to the wholeness of his catalogue. His literature, he says, his and Holleran’s, are thoroughly gay insights into the homosexual experience, and because they are that way, straight people do not want to discover “us” and “who we are” (Kramer, “Times”). In his writing for *Paper*, he goes on to criticize *The New York Times* for describing Holleran in a review as inaccessible for heterosexual audiences, in their own words that “the works become inaccessible to anyone else, like looking through a window at someone else's world” (Kramer, “Times”). Kramer argues that this quality is something to be valued and appreciated, that giving lens and insight into another experience is what literature should aspire in its function to be, but because that

window is fundamentally gay it proves ultimately unappealing and dismissible to straight critics. Aside from illustrating the critical gap in knowledge pertaining to a pantheon of gay authors, Kramer's assertion establishes a crucial notion about the function of both his and Holleran's work. He argues here that to build a feature, an operation, wherein an audience may look through it and then see another world is "exactly what any good writer tries to do," and if Kramer considers himself a good writer – he certainly does consider Holleran one, at least – then the window is the work of both their literature ("Times").

Imagining this window then, imagining a function of literature wherein what is featured within the text acts as a reality an observer can see and engage in, the precise representation of that reality becomes intricately expressive of sodality and culture. Kramer and Holleran's early careers have a remarkably similar trajectory in depicting this reality; orienting their catalogues toward the onset of gay liberation, their early novels all trace gay sodality and its relation to independent identity while their later work revisits that same culture in the face of HIV/AIDS. The disease's homodiegetic capacity to recolor and splinter gay cultural narratives displays a sense of developing cultural trauma, a phenomena identified by Jeffrey C. Alexander in his volume *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* that "occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (6). Featuring the effects felt by HIV/AIDS as a sort of trauma actualizes and even physicalizes it in both the reality and sodality revealed within the 'window' of their literature. Although the two's careers are much alike, the

thematic conclusions reached in their later work offer strikingly different realizations of sodality.

Placing Kramer and Holleran together in a single comparative form signifies a larger universality beyond the individual experience as they express sentiments both from and for the shared sodality of a wider culture at large. Although both authors exist in spaces of considerable privilege as cisgender, white and marginally wealthy individuals – about the least vulnerable demographic within LGBTQ communities to receive a positive HIV diagnosis in their lifetime – their writings are directly concerned with the panoramic theater of gay culture as a whole, that is, the breadth and scope of a community that contains an astounding diversity (AVERT). This ‘theater of gay culture’ is better described as *theatre* than *theater* – it is *theatrical* in a sense of literal performance, displaying tragedy, trauma, horror and death through an Aristotelian exhibition toward empathy.

In manifesting cultural trauma, it appears as if Holleran and Kramer have become disenfranchised and cynical, horrified and tired of the endless death each endured in the 1980’s. And that is true: it is undeniable the qualities of *The Normal Heart* and *The Destiny of Me* along with Holleran’s *Grief* and *The Beauty of Men* are registered in a fiercely darker tone. As each author constructs gay identity in relation to queer culture, however, a surprising lightness and sense of humor emerges that reconsiders the sex negativity and pessimism that appears to define so much of what is at play here.

These later texts display and exhibit tragedy in a figurative state of theatre, all addressing trauma inflicted by both HIV/AIDS and gay sodality within a performative

setting. I mean theatre here in a less literal sense and more as a displayed act staged with Aristotelian inclinations toward the emotional. *The Beauty of Men's Lark*, the unnamed narrator at the center of *Grief* and Ned Weeks in both *The Normal Heart* and *Destiny of Me* are positioned in the midst of desolation and hardship that registers in excruciating, uncanny tragedy to the last detail; David M. Halperin calls this a “performance of suffering” in *How to Be Gay*, and he writes that it improperly functions in a heterosexual complex – that is, ‘mainstream’ or ‘normative’ modes of media consumption (187). Although straight audiences may simply be unaware of a performance of suffering, its impact on creating a sort of bathos for these texts is distinctly gay. Performance of suffering is innately postmodern, self-referential and tragic to a comedic degree, Halperin argues, and in heteronormative settings, this performance reads as inauthentic or even as an attack on the authenticity of lived experience (187). When enacted through gayness, however, it behaves differently: “to refuse to exempt yourself from the irony with which you view all social identities, all performances of authorized social roles, is to level social distinctions” (187 - 188). In turn, these performances allow for the construction of a “collective understanding and sense of solidarity,” in effect, instrumentalizing queer aesthetics (Halperin 188). When stationed within the body of Holleran and Kramer’s windowed representation of sodality, performance of suffering reorients the superficial emotion initially evident for a greater *construction* of sodality.

The work of this thesis is to traverse the distance between sociological notions of cultural trauma and toward the literary body of gay authors as their work transforms in the face of HIV/AIDS, comprising sodality and identity. As Kramer and Holleran

among others experienced the immeasurable horror of epidemic, their novels, stories and plays pressurize a metamorphosis under the impetus of mass death; the shapes, themes and qualities of their careers changing into wildly different creations. Tracing the development of Kramer and Holleran's oeuvre reveals not only the emotionality and thematic work of novels like *Faggots* and *Dancer from the Dance*, but also how HIV/AIDS as a trigger of mass cultural trauma shapes and develops the formal manner in which queer authors realize gay identity and sodality in their work. The nature of how that identity is determined is often surprising, filled with bouts of fear, desolation, tragedy, humor, determination and even hope in a setting that seems utterly hopeless. It is, in effect, the "despair because of it," as Holleran puts it in *Dancer from the Dance*, a motion of despondency and upset from the conditions gay men experience as members and participants, willing or not, of gay sodality. This same despondency, this despair, however, operates in a multifaceted manner where it in effect manages to construct a positivity in its own independent sodality, utilizing rhetoric, queer aesthetic and the experience of engagement with the texts. Like the term *despair* itself, there is a certain humor, joy and shared culture in the moment of suffering that Kramer and Holleran articulate as their work progresses. *Despair* references a feeling and sentiment from the past within a present that can reinterpret it as a force of culture and agency itself.

Ultimately, these authors characterize gay culture as a living agent, an organism capable of acting and being acted upon by its constituent members. From the dizzying vibrancy of their early novels to the stark horror of their later, the developing form of gay culture as they see it consistently transforms and changes, in its alterations unveiling how relationships with culture give us the characteristics we define ourselves

by. And with the advent of their later work, Kramer and Holleran in fact construct gay sodality themselves in depicting it, both by exhibiting rhetoric form and by relying on specifically gay evocations of camp and comedy. The means authors like Holleran and Kramer take to depict camp and comedy extrapolates on the nature of cultural identity, trauma and how both of them make a gay identity, particularly in pertinence to HIV/AIDS and its longstanding interactions with homosexual sodality. *Despair Because of It* looks to synthesize sociological and cultural readings into a close analysis of literary form, elucidating what it means to be a gay man from the stress endured underneath sodality and disease.

## Chapter 1: “To Be Desired, Not Possessed:” Communal Formation of

### Gayness in *Faggots*, *Dancer from the Dance*

*Dancer from the Dance* is Andrew Holleran’s first novel, a gorgeously rendered and colorful evaluation of gay living in 1970s New York City. Published in 1978, critics have characterized the volume somewhat frequently as a gay *Great Gatsby*, a tragic parable of opulence and desire wherein a mythic figure falls from glory in the pursuit of love and happiness in an era superficially obsessed with the lavish joys of wealth and high society. The mythic figure of *Dancer*... is not a J. Gatsby and the setting is not the sumptuous world of the 1920’s, but rather an institution of eroticism and interconnected gossip that winds into an almost organic being, a living society in which all its members find themselves anonymously tangled in sex with their partners and peers. As Andrew Schopp notes in “The Gay *Great Gatsby*: Andrew Holleran’s *Dancer from the Dance* and Dismantling of Normative Cultural Frames,” Holleran’s queer contemporary Edmund White described *Dancer* as a novel that, “accomplished for the 1970s what *The Great Gatsby* achieved for the 1920s... the glamorization of a decade and a culture” (Schopp).

*Glamorization* here is a loaded term that only flirts with the actuality of *Dancer from the Dance*’s apparent themes and intentions. The language associates depictions of gay culture with a form of otherness – it suggests that describing gay culture as Holleran does is to make it seem more appealing or desirable, as if its qualities are something wrong to make seem attractive. *Glamorization* as a term relies on heterosexist rhetoric that Holleran himself has disputed directly, “In my mind,” he says, “*Dancer* is a critical/satiric book. It’s not a glamorization of gay life” (Paul Morton). Though studded



with fabulous and vibrant details of a world that appears to be a genuine escape from the trappings of a confined life, *Dancer from the Dance*'s New York is both studded with tragedy and hardly glamorous. The novel follows Anthony Malone as he abandons his formerly heterosexual life in the midwest for the wilds of a gay New York, suddenly finding himself enmeshed in a cycle of sex, gossip and drugs all shepherded by the elusive drag queen and social acolyte Andrew Sutherland. Sutherland himself calls Malone in one scene "charmingly lost," while Malone characterizes Sutherland throughout as an idol of the world around him (Holleran, *Dancer* 99). The two present a foil for one another: Malone as a staunch but beautiful newcomer to a universe he has never seen before and Sutherland as an aged and gaudy empress of it all, governing New York with a certain hold and familiarity with its queer population. Though the plot suggests Sutherland's Jane Austen-esque attempt to court Malone with a young millionaire as its leading thread, *Dancer*'s... real substance comes in the eponymous allegory of the frivolous social dance that traps its characters into the bondage of what Holleran considers to be meaningless sex and vapidness. As I'll argue, the sodality Holleran makes real in his work is an opulent, absorbing dance that relies on camp and repurposed deployments of religion to display the development of queer identity.

This central allegory of dance comes from a William Butler Yeats poem, "Among School Children," and engineers the novel's narrative voice as it surmises sodality. "Among School Children" is partially featured in the novel's introduction: "Labor is blossoming or dancing where / The body is not bruised to pleasure soul, / Not beauty born out of its own despair,... / O Body swayed to music, O brightening glance, / How can we know the dancer from the dance?" (Holleran, *Dancer* 5). The dance of

Yeats' verse appears as a ceaseless engine pushing toward an unknowable void, a visage of happiness that contains beneath it complete desolation and dejection. "Not beauty born out of its own despair," Yeats writes, envisioning an entity at once in love with its own gorgeous state and tortured by it in equal measure (Hollaran, *Dancer* 5). It is, like Hollaran's sodality, something to be looked at, a "glance," that Yeats immediately emphasizes the importance of with its direct rhyme to the final phrase of verse, "dance" (*Dancer* 5). The final line sets the stage for the novel, asking how an individual within a painful institution can divide oneself from it and how they can ever be differentiated from one another.

Hollaran realizes this central metaphor from his novel's title in the thematic groundwork of *Dancer from the Dance* but also in its particular narrative styling. The voice of the narrator moves as if it is spinning and turning, passed from one mover to the next as a chorus of gay men unveils the plot's detail through sidewalk chatter and gossip, passed along letters riddled throughout and admissions of secrets and canards that give the plot its reality and theme. In this sense, the very voice of the novel solidifies a cultural organism, told in the moving parts of a body built from high emotionality and exchanges of sex that warble from meaningless to revelatory, tragic to euphoric. *Dancer from the Dance* as a whole oozes with the liquid foundation of a cultural sodality made up of men whose interactions with one another form a strange shape that is as often as appealing as it is appalling. This dichotomy exemplifies a despair because of it, an uncanny engagement in culture that seems as dangerous as it is attractive. Interacting with it defines the lives and identities of its participants, and, at the novel's conclusion, seeing Sutherland dead and Malone vanished from New York,

the novel moves entirely into the voice of its sodality in which the narration cannot so much as directly depict the events of the text, only listen to what the patrons can theorize on it. “Half those people who used to go to Sutherland’s to shoot up have moved to San Francisco, and I heard Rafael opened up a plant store in Queens. For the truth is, darling, what happens to most of these people anyway? They have their fling and then they vanish,” Holleran writes in the form of a letter, depicting a moving force that wavers so intensely from one individual to the next it even loses them in the midst of it (*Dancer*, 239).

As Holleran renders this body of cultural gayness through the narrative’s voice, one way in which he establishes the agency and action of sodality is by calling attention to a separation of *gayness* from the *gay man*. Instead of a symbiotic agent, the two are analogous but distinct forces forming a system of exchange that fosters interaction between each of its two entities. In the just previously featured passage, gayness is something “these people” have only a “fling” with before disappearing and separating from it for all intents and purposes (Holleran *Dancer*, 239). Academia assessing Holleran has noted this divide between gayness and gay people within his work as well. In “From Dancing to Grieving: Homosexual Otherness in Andrew Holleran’s Novels,” Marcin Sroczynski describes the gay men ensnared in the dance of homosexual male culture as, “protagonists... estranged from the homosexual identity which is supposed to be their own: they do not embrace it and wish to be someone else, they aspire to a heteronormative model of life from which they are excluded” (67). They are, he writes, specifically “estranged,” not embracing the identity they partake in yet still finding distance from it. He points to several characters bemoaning their state of being, longing

for ‘traditional’ heterosexual lifestyles with wives and children and comparing their sexuality to disease and cancer (Sroczynski 67). These instances, he argues, along with the detachedly realized landscapes of clubs, bathhouses and discotheques, contribute to a sense of gay men at odds with their own sense of belonging, trapped in “a lifestyle which is a caricature of their own stereotypical image forged by the dominant heteronormative discourse... unable to seek personal fulfillment within the social framework they find themselves in” (Sroczynski 68). He writes that these interactions, locations and confessions all separate gay men from the gay “lifestyle” they find themselves endlessly shackled to.

It seems unfounded to suggest that this “lifestyle,” as Sroczynski refers to it, originates as a realization of enforced stereotypes when characters like Sutherland exist in unapologetically queer modes that actively defy expectations of heterosexual stereotyping. Certainly, the cast displays elements of cis normative heterosexual behaviors, but their entire cultural being hardly reads as something derived from straight perceptions of gayness. In fact, the heterosexual populace only appears in *Dancer from the Dance* in its relation to gayness. Despite these misgivings, Sroczynski’s suggestion that gay culture and gay men are emulous, opposing forces that act on one another establishes a division and connection wherein Holleran characterizes sodality.

Characters describing their own sexuality and the world it exists in explicitly reveal this division between culture and individual, in one scene, “Malone, feeling more depressed than ever, could not refrain from asking: ‘Do You sometimes not loathe being--gay?,’” to which Sutherland responds, “‘My dear, you play the hand you’re

dealt” (Holleran, *Dancer* 104). Gayness, the experience of being a gay person, appears here as something that is dealt. It is not generated by itself, but given and then experienced. Later, a more emboldened Malone on the shores of Fire Island Pines asks, “What is gay life but those bumper cars at an amusement park, that crash and bounce off each other? Like some Demolition Derby” (Holleran, *Dancer* 228). Both of these instances describe gayness as something that acts, throwing men together as if bumper cars in a demolition derby or played like a bad hand of poker. The precise language of these analogies suggests game and enjoyment in bumper cars and cards, poker itself a performative sport wherein individuals playing with a bad hand must pretend as if they do not, bumper cars a pastime asking its players to bash into one another for enjoyment. Describing gay living in this way makes sodality out as something amusing, a game, but complicated by the performativity and violence they each prescribe. Sodality, represented by these games, operates as a distinct and separate entity from the individual and stations them into complicated positions as if players in a game.

In this sense, gay men are simultaneously tormented and captivated by gayness while gayness is animated and brought alive by gay men and their relationships with one another. The sex homosexual men share, the habits they form and the places they frequent come to be under gay culture, but gay culture also governs the nature of these experiences. Each entity maintains its own agency, but the constitution of interactions between the two remains dramatically in favor of sodality as the dominant force. When sodality and individual interact, sodality prevails within Holleran’s work.

This kind of language is, again, essential to Holleran’s characterization of gay sodality as its own independent, acting force. Within the text, Holleran almost

ubiquitously refers to homosexuality in the cultural sense as something that happens, a something that takes action and then *does* something itself. Gayness is not a ‘something’ that is acted, adopted, taken on or developed, but a something that actively *does*, operates and conducts. It is a something that is “dealt” (Holleran, *Dancer* 104). When it is something that is exterior to the person – while still being something experienced by that same person – the actions sodality takes are more explicitly something acted by the sodality rather than the individual.

It should be noted that this separation is in itself a notable connection. It establishes a relationship where there are two distinct but interacting figures, that of the gay person and that of the gay sodality. While they are indeed autonomous beings, one cannot exist without the other. Without a conflicting force, a challenge or another presence, there is no individual, and thus, the conflict or disagreement between gay individual and gay culture in fact defines the both the gay individual and culture. As Didier Eribon articulates in *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self*:

we need not imagine these to be two distinct moments: identification and disidentification can be simultaneous. The one can exist by means of the other. It is a matter of taking up the act of claiming freedom at the point to which others have brought it – but also at the point at which some may have left it behind. The process of self-creation and self-recreation must always be revived. (140)

It does not matter, in this sense, that a gay man may choose to disavow himself of sodality. The process in which he engages or disengages with it actualizes himself as a gay individual. Separation here is important as a means of demonstrating the acting

capacity of sodality, rather than suggesting an inconsequence in its effect on gay individual: in its agency, it defines the individual.

The precise nature of this separation and its effects are on display throughout *Dancer from the Dance* and describe how Holleran characterizes sodality. In one sequence set at the “Twelfth Floor,” a club inspired by the famed 10th Floor, a discotheque located across from the Everard Baths in New York City, the narrative voice swings away from Malone and Sutherland and toward patron and suitor John Schaeffer, who, in pursuit of Malone, finds himself, “just a prisoner of habit” (Holleran, *Dancer* 132). Per Holleran’s description, John Schaeffer finds himself not interacting with gayness but rather totalized by it, relocated and placed in a system in which he cannot move himself out of. The word “habit” refers to the futile behaviors he has grown accustomed to and ensuingly become trapped by. It is in this same moment Holleran refers to an ambiguous “you” – “In the midst of all the lights, and music, the bodies... you go through the motions of dancing you are thinking of a thousand disparate things,” he writes. “You put a hand out to lightly touch the sweaty, rigid stomach of the man dancing next to you... you are thinking, grave as a judge: What will I do with my life?... You have been expelled from the communion of the saints” (Holleran, *Dancer* 132). This final sentence closes a lengthy paragraph addressed to the reader as a queer individual, informing them they have been registered as unholy.

For Holleran, sex is the most intimate means of building and approaching one’s own identity, especially, if not exclusively, for gay men. Sex is a means of sodality and one of its primary components, and the sexual orbit in which men interact does more than simply display the development of an identity, it also stages witness to the conduct

of an acting culture. That culture maintains a rapturous duress, a power so immense Holleran can only equate it to a pious entity.

Sex defines the very existence, as if a matter of theology, in *Dancer from the Dance*'s cast of characters as they relate to sodality. Holleran describes Malone in his introduction as someone who, "would be memorialized in gossip... or in those casual conversations after sex in which two strangers discover they know exactly the same people and live exactly the same lives" (*Dancer* 33). The sprawling plexus of intimacy that delineates Holleran's gay New York enshrines the egos and lives of those occupying it. The fashion in which sodality captures the being of these men makes them out as if religious icons, martyrs, pietàs and pantocratore of a homosexual Jesus. Describing a bathhouse full of men recently engaged in sex, Holleran writes of the patrons, "rising from the couches where they had been sprawled like martyrs who had given up their souls to Christ" (*Dancer* 39). When they rise for gospel, it is to the lyrics of a Patty Joe song: "Make me believe in you, show me that love can be true" (*Dancer* 39).

When Malone first engages in sex with another man, it is a genuinely religious experience, oral sex passed between two men who do not know one another at Dupont Circle ameliorated "as if another being had momentarily occupied the physical shell that was Malone" (Holleran, *Dancer* 73). Holleran goes on, "Malone believed in some undefined but literal sense that the body was the temple of the Holy Ghost: the pure vessel... It was his first miserable, yet strangely vivid, dawn of that sort and he watched it silently in a white, rigid state of self condemnation before which any judgment of God would have paled" (*Dancer* 74). In sex with another man, Malone's body is invaded and



resurrected, some greater force, a gay sexuality, possessing him and putting him before a God he does not recognize, leaving him only to turn his faith and sense of self toward another being, rejecting contrition. By that chapter's conclusion, Malone is changed and religiously devoted in an entirely new sense, "--devoted not to Christ, in whom he no longer believed, but love" (Holleran, *Dancer* 78).

The revelatory, prayerful nature of sex functions in *Dancer from the Dance* synonymously with Holleran's portrayal of gay culture. Assuming a homosexual sodality is in fact separate here from the homosexual individual as I have argued up to this point, it may seem at odds to suggest the act of gay sex – a willing decision between two *individuals* – belongs to sodality rather than the individual. Holleran, however, frequently reminds readers that acts of sex are inseparable from the culture they are captured in: "'What do we all have in common in this group?' I once asked a friend seriously, when it occurred to me how slender, how immaterial, how ephemeral the bond was that joined us; and he responded, 'We all have lips'" (*Dancer* 114). Sex, lips and their functions together bond gay men in this sense, forging the flimsy but present connections that create a culture when linked between enough people.

This scene sets itself in one of New York's bathhouses, a topic that will be discussed in greater detail later, but it should not be without note that the bathhouse represents sexuality made tangible and physical through ritual, practice and communal agreement. In "Speaking to the Gay Bathhouse" from the endlessly insightful anthology, *Public Sex / Gay Space*, Ira Tattelman writes, "The authority of desires... is celebrated and with it, very specific forms of language, contact, and consumption develop. These rituals and behaviors are part of a language that only the initiated can

understand” (Leap 93). The framework Tattelman establishes here is that sex as an act immediately requires behavior, recognition and practice that ultimately constitutes a culture in the broader sense. A later essay in *Public Sex / Gay Space*, “Beauty and the Beach: Representing Fire Island,” agrees that this framework applies equally in Holleran to spaces outside of bathhouses, where rituals and ceremonies constitute a culture. “The sex [in *Dancer from the Dance*] both public and private – no distinction is made between the two... is not separated from other aesthetic limits” (David Bergman 107). The aesthetics and qualities of a specific gay space, although the two may inevitably differ, are not necessarily separated.

In this manner, Holleran’s religious writing of sex translates to his prescription of gay culture as well. It maintains the capacity to install, question and act upon the individual, in this case, inserting revelations of selfhood in the form of religious epiphany and imagery. This holiness works in a certain mode of camp, that is, as David M. Halperin describes in *How to Be Gay*, “Camp is not criticism, but critique. It does not aim to correct and improve, but to question, to undermine, and to destabilize” (190). The sometimes delirious and comedic nature of religion and its pertinence to sex does the work of camp here, destabilizing both religious intent and the sex gay men experience when close in proximity to it.

This righteousness collapses under the weight of gay sodality, however, and all the identity established from engagement in a queer sodality breaks in the novel’s final chapters. On Fire Island (“The Dangerous Island,” Sutherland refers to it, “Dangerous because you may lose your heart”), the idyllic sexuality and vibrancy of New York defaults into a catalyst of tragedy (Holleran, *Dancer* 180). As Sutherland attempts to

persuade Malone to make an appearance at the island's festivities in hopes of coupling him to the aforementioned suitor, John Schaeffer, tension arises in what each man attempts to find on the shores of Fire Island Pines. In the same voice of the holy ceremonies and rituals that fill *Dancer*... thus far, Sutherland begs Malone to attend, to "refresh ourselves with the original mysteries and rites around which, really, our whole lives revolve" (Holleran 204). It is then Malone sees these rites for what they are, "as if a sink had been emptied by someone pulling the plug: the green water gone, odd things clinging to the porcelain" (Holleran, *Dancer* 205). Sutherland's sentiments cement his fate on the island, unveiling the beautiful fallacy of what each man has pioneered their lives around. He overdoses alone only to be uncovered days later with a note reading "Don't awaken me. It was kind of you to come, I'll call you in the city. Kisses to you" (Holleran, *Dancer* 233). Holleran punctuates the note with a sentence that irrevocably bonds his misbegotten death to the hopeless but holy pursuit of love that sexual culture establishes throughout: "A forest of X's followed, which looked like crosses, but were really kisses" (*Dancer* 233). The camp of religious sex's effect on identity reveals a certain illusion and pain inflicted by sodality.

A conversation between Sutherland and a younger gay man, Archer, further elucidates the falsity of holy action and intervention taken by the gay mores:

I don't think two men can *love* each other... in that way. It will always be a sterile union, it will always be associated with guilt. Sometimes I think that God was sitting up above the world one day, after He had created it... and someone said, 'Now what could we throw in to spoil it? You've created such a perfect existence, how could it go amuck?' And someone said, 'Confuse the sexes.

Have the men desire men instead of women, and the women desire women. That would do it! (*Dancer* 169)

Here, gayness is an act of holiness, direct and divine intervention from God to alter the experience of its disciples. Despite that act's innate righteousness as an action taken by God, it nonetheless demonstrates Holleran's central confutation that a gay society is both religious and sacrilegious at once as an operation that literally damns its members. Sutherland attempts to refute the young man's apocalyptic tone of an inevitably loveless life, but his insistence that most men are simply too closed off to embrace affection cannot save him as he perishes at the hand of the sodality in the novel's final act.

Holleran's understanding of what sodality specifically does here is that it acts upon the gay individual with a captivating, holy force within sexual interaction. Holleran characterizes this force, however, as one that despite its desirability in fact harms the individual. Larry Kramer's incendiary 1978 debut, *Faggots*, at first glance, appears to carry some significant resemblance to Holleran's ideology. Both novels are obsessed with the function of sex as a constructive force in the summation of a gay culture, both disturbed but deeply stuck in the *carnivàle* of bathhouses and sex clubs, Fire Island and the cruising grounds of Central Park. They climax in the same locality, they both feature heterodiegetic events within the confines of their novel to communicate despondency, and they both criticize sexual culture to varying degree. The employment of these devices, however, vary as astoundingly as the reception between the novels. Whereas *Dancer from the Dance* has been fondly commented on consistently, Kramer's work saw a hard reaction from its publication onward that endures today.

Both inside and outside of gay literary thought, *Faggots* has experienced a well of fury for its frank and scathing depiction of gay male sexual behaviors. Critics characterized the novel as ham-fisted, crude and homophobic, one 1978 review of the novel, thinly titled “Love on the Seedy Side,” deriding the novel in no uncertain terms, likened it to the rhetoric of famous homophobe Anita Bryant (Harrison). The novel had been disowned in scores by gay men, to the extent that New York City’s most well-known gay bookstore banned the text from its shelves; Randy Shilts in his survey of AIDS history describes the reaction to Kramer’s work:

Everything from its title, *Faggots*, to its graphic descriptions of hedonism on the Greenwich Village-Cherry Grove axis had stirred frenzy among both reviewers and the people whose milieu Larry had set out to chronicle. Manhattan’s only gay bookstore had banned the novel from its shelves while gay critics had advised readers that its purchase represented an act inimical to the interests of gay liberation. (26)

Queer theorists, gay men and critics outside the scene alike all found a fiery distaste for Kramer and his rhetoric. In an interview with *Emerald City TV*, 1977, Kramer directly refuted the criticism against his work: “‘How dare I expose all of this at this very tender moment in the cause of gay liberation when you’re not allowed to say anything for fear it’ll be ammunition for Anita Bryant...’ I’m saying we have to put our own house in order” (O’Dowd). Why the novel is so unliked by queer theorists to this day, and why it has been regularly greeted with disdain is important; it displays the distance between popular understandings of gay sodality and that of Kramer’s own inflammatory impression.

That impression is one set in place as a means of “putting our own house in order,” as Kramer describes in an interview with Emerald City TV. The notion of putting a house in order is a tonal key in discussing *Faggots*’ relationship to gayness and gay identity, especially when, as he flatly retorts in the same interview, Kramer doesn’t “see promiscuity as positive” (O’Dowd). The novel reads as an organizational effort, starkly displaying the undesirable, uncomfortable and unappealing corners of gay culture, in particular the sexual and erotic climate of that culture, so that Kramer can call attention to its errs. Its intention seems clear that in displaying what Kramer perceives to be a mess, perhaps that same mess can be reassembled into something Kramer finds more favorable. This is largely the work of *Faggots*: displaying what Kramer characterizes as unflattering so that he can surmise a more desirable organization of sodality.

It is, in all fairness, more than easy to read *Faggots* as this scathing and cruel vision of homosexuality in the 1970’s. As a narrative, it exists largely in sweeping moments of pronounced group sex and drug use, in between orgies at Fire Island and nights out in New York clubs that Kramer writes with an air of libertine chaos. Every gay man in *Faggots* is first and foremost a gay man, a *faggot* in Kramer’s terms, whose base existence is best defined by their inclinations toward non-monogamous sex that blends each individual into a single, indistinguishable unit. “This is one massive cake of solid body, thousands, Hot men,” Kramer writes in a passage that reads as critically as it does with a tone of disgust, “radiating enough heat to defrost Arctic wastes and I am being pulled into it and I am dancing and dancing, oh we are so many bodies... and we swing and sway and sweat becoming One” (*Faggots*, 352). The capitalization on the

word “One” at the end of a particularly long sentence punctuates Kramer’s almost comically rendered distaste here.

Kramer best defines the novel’s eponymous terminology in introducing Boo Boo Bronstein, a young man whose sexuality comes across as relatively new in comparison to the rest of the cast. “For he knew there was a pit of sexuality out there and that he longed to throw himself into it,” Kramer writes of Boo Boo’s declaration of gayness. “I have to! I have to!... Because it’s part of the faggot life style – to find abandonment and freedom through ecstasy – fucking and being fucked and light s & m and shitting and pissing and Oh I want to be abandoned” (*Faggots* 47-48). To be a faggot, Kramer establishes, is to find freedom, selfhood and individuality within sex, precisely, lots of sex, and sex that features behaviors outside ‘conventional’ heteronormative sex.

Boo Boo describes these desires diegetically in the narrative voice, “I want to be a Number! I want to be a Number!” (Kramer, *Faggots* 46). Here, the perspective voice embodies Boo Boo and thus speaks as both the whole and individual as it expresses its longing to disappear into a statistic. The notion of number, and what it means to belong both *in* and *as a* number, is essential for Kramer; he opens *Faggots* with a census, a summation of every gay man in New York City reduced to a cold and unblinking statistic. “There are 2,556,596 faggots in the New York City area,” he writes. “The largest number, 983,919 live in Manhattan. 186,991 live in Queens, or just across the river. 181,236 live in Brooklyn and 180,009 live in the Bronx. 2,469 live on Staten Island” (*Faggots* 3). The biting objectivity of this opening report sets the stage for Kramer’s tendency to erase distinctiveness between gay men.

Kramer's penchant for defeatistly summing and totaling "faggots" recalls an eerie similarity to biblical narratives. As Satan rises in 21:1-16, his appearance results in David surveying the lands of Israel for a census of its population and warriors: "God was very displeased with the census, and he punished Israel for it. Then David said to God, 'I have sinned greatly by taking this census. Please forgive my guilt for doing this foolish thing.'" God's punishment for David's error, of which he is given three options to choose from, is the death of 70,000 Israelites by means of plague. The narrator of *Faggots* acts as God in this context, cursing the sodality of this specifically defined integer with an existence it characterizes as meaningless, cursed and even deadly.

Kramer as narrator punishes his subjects in equal measure, scorning them with a tone that berates, skewers and reduces its members into a long and unfortunate joke. There is very little redemption for any character, and the giant mass of men that composes gay sodality appears as a humorously rendered engine of destruction and meaninglessness. The narrative voice of *Faggots*, primarily a close third-person and occasional first-person that variates between a slew of men who do and do not know one another, displays this futility and pain as it embodies the intricate net of relationships that stand in place of a gay culture at large. Like *Dancer from the Dance*, the voice of a gay community cannot be communicated through one protagonist alone. Instead, it must be articulated in a series of testimonies, accounts, summaries and confessions from men, the narrative frequently diverting into first person exclamations and remarks. Kramer is obsessed with giving these men voices, and naming each one of them as well.



Despite describing these men as points of data, he names a certain number of them with the comedic sensibility of camp. Kramer's evocations of camp denote a cultural engagement that may not be evident at first glance; as Halperin writes, "Gay writers... have been creating an original culture for well over a century now, even if many of them had to operate under the cover of a heterosexual subject matter... By contrast, drag, camp, and various cultural appropriations and identifications are all, properly speaking, *subcultural* practices" (422). Interestingly, Kramer is appropriating forms of subcultural gayness in this methodology as a means of criticizing gay sodality; meanwhile, the subcultural practice of camp and drag, which he inarguably pulls from in naming characters Randy Dildough and Blaze Sorority, remains rooted in the art and pronouncement of identity from black gay men, transgender women and drag queens. The work then as Kramer catalogues a variety of individuals from "Dom Dom and Frigger" to "Montoya and Lork and Carlty and Yo-Yo," along with every "Maxine," "Bruce Sex-toys," "Yootha Truth" and "Billy Boner" in between, is to take practices from gay and trans mores and to redeploy in forming criticisms against that same mores (*Faggots* 362). As the narrative allots these men agency as the select few to receive actual designations among millions, their existences are nevertheless marked up to sexuality almost exclusively, and for Kramer, any individual who aligns themselves with sex is problematizing gay existence.

The exchange of sex in *Faggots* ensuingly appears utterly sex-negative, actively resentful of promiscuity and acidic in its characterization of those who choose to engage in it. Yet Kramer cannot avoid denoting sex as an essential component in the construction of identity. Tay Lai Kit's "Quest to Freedom: Reclaiming Individuality

through Sado-Masochism in *Faggots* by Larry Kramer” posits gay male sexuality within the novel as explicitly *sadomasochistic* – that is, it singularly inflicts pain and pleasure simultaneously for those taking part in it. Suffering and the act of harming oneself is integral, Kit argues, to describing a queer sexuality within *Faggots*. Writing in one meaningful passage, Kit makes this out as indicative of a larger relation to the process of individuation:

For these characters sexual intercourse is just a way for them to be together as they are scared to be alone... Loneliness is a constant struggle for these characters because it highlights the detachment and sorrow of the process of individuation. Therefore, the instant solution which they settle on is meaningless hookups which ultimately results in failure and disappointment... There is no sense of love or any form of emotional bond between the characters at all. In this sense, physical intimacy is seen as an immediate release for them which highlights the severe sadomasochistic tendency in them. (508)

Individuation both breaks and binds its subjects from sodality and presents a problem in Kit’s own text; if sex and hookups are meaningless, then how can they individuate and develop identity in the first place? As gay men in *Faggots* engage in sex with one another, they are both learning identity and replacing it, it is only the presence of Kramer’s rhetoric that appears to characterize it as meaningless or problematic.

Individuation is the process of forging – and losing – true identity in relation to others, and for the almost forty-year-old Fred Lemish, crafting a selfhood remains the ultimate personal conflict. “All your life has been a journey to find an identity,” the speaker says, addressing the audience as Fred while he contemplates his relationship

with Dinky. “Why are you letting this loser help you lose one?” He then immediately adds thereafter, “He sure is a vision, standing up in all that leather” (Kramer, *Faggots* 317). Fred’s admission that he loses his distinctiveness and ipseity in chasing after Dinky sits right next to his own comment of how attractive Dinky looks, and how much Fred wants him. “Your crotch, please note, has not ceased its admiration... Your crotch, please note, wants a return engagement of that admiration” (Kramer, *Faggots* 317). In this passage, Fred is in a state of conflict from his relationship to sex, representing the larger problem of Kramer’s text; sex seems to make up the individual through individuation, but must be condemned under the narrative polemic.

The conflict in Fred’s character comes from his desire to be wanted and his desire to experience something him and Kramer seem to find irreconcilable, that is, real love: “two guys who share mutual affection and attraction, mutual interests, and terrific sex,” as Fred describes it (*Faggots*, 318). In becoming so deeply enmeshed in the individuation that gay culture enforces, he believes he has lost any chance at achieving the novel’s notion of real love. *Faggots*’ opening describes in detail the anguish he experiences at his lack of sincere affection, but more so, it features his efforts to overcome what he believes to be the reasons he remains single. His introduction is at odds with Fred’s apparent aspirations, displaying him at a bathhouse where another man requests, “Baby, I want you to piss all over me!” (Kramer, *Faggots* 5). This is the first we see of Fred Lemish, depressed over his state of relations but stationed in a context of anonymous sex in which someone begs him to engage. If Fred’s desire is to be wanted, then it would seem he has achieved it from this sequence. Nonetheless, much of *Faggots* functions in this sort of diptych, displaying the wants and desires of its subjects

and then placing them immediately next to what Kramer characterizes as the reason they cannot get what they want. As Fred maneuvers the bathhouse, surveying the sex around him, he wonders as a writer what he might have to say about the whole affair, “Had he not decided to write about a Voyage of Discovery into this World in which he lived? This Faggot World” (Kramer, *Faggots* 8). “This Faggot World” is something Kramer wants us to be unsettled by if the tone of this passage is to be understood – “large and ugly,” he describes of its physicality – yet the Faggot World he describes gives individuation and identity for those taking part in it (*Faggots*, 7).

To make the distinction between good individuation and bad individuation in Kramer is to compare the novel’s first and last scenes, where the narrative voice in no oblique language defines what should make a gay man happy in life. What is bad individuation is made abundantly clear; in the same vein that Fred Lemish stands in for an older man losing his understanding of the world he finds himself in, the sixteen year old Timmy Purvis acts as an icon of the newly initiated, a young model still unadmitted into homosexual sex. His first experience displays the manner in which Kramer describes sodality’ behavior, depicting precisely how the webbing of a gay institution begin to affect the individual. Timmy, invited to an orgy, undergoes his inaugural experience with gay sex that reconfigures his notion of self: “he thinks, to just beneath his heart, he feels his heart massaged, he feels the love within it, imprisoned within it all his lifetime... begin to explode out, start to ooze toward Winnie, like a life handed over, take my life, Winston Man, take all of me” (*Faggots* 134). It’s his “solar plexus, the beginnings of his river’s rush upstream from its source to its dispatch” (*Faggots* 131). The awakening in this scene displays Timmy’s burgeoning sexuality as something that

individuates his identity as well, literally offering his unique human integrity away to Winston as he becomes more immersed in immediate pleasure, orbiting around the plexus of his rapidly developing selfhood.

Kramer is insistent that the kind of sex readers see in *Faggots* is a handing over of identity, or even a theft of it, robbed by the viscous solution gay mores takes the form of. Boo Boo, having finally arrived in the so-called “Pits of Sexuality” on Fire Island and at last being able to identify himself as a “Number,” demands, “Take my big delts! Take my big lats! Take my obliques... Take all of me! My name is Richie Bronstein! At last I’m a Fire Island Star!” (*Faggots* 341). Here, he is several things at once: disconnected parts of a body, a Number, a Fire Island Star and, ultimately, Richie Bronstein. The dialogue displays this Richie Bronstein, however, as accumulated pieces made of isolated limbs, parts and desires collected and carved into an idol. Under Kramer’s characterization of gay sex, Bronstein becomes an example of those individuals stuck in the machine of mores that sinks into collective mass of gay mores. Bronstein’s last appearance in the novel is in its final census, among exactly seventy-three other names. He has been ‘taken,’ and ensuingly repossessed.

Kramer’s presentation of how gay sodality acts in sex centers itself on consumption and giving of the self and body, particularly in one scene where Dinky is fisted in a public orgy on Fire Island. “You now have all of me, Dinky,” his partner says, before then asking, “Will you throw away your leather and your dildoes and cast of thousands and lies?,” asking literally for the bequeathing of his partner (Kramer, *Faggots* 338). Dinky goes on to ask for more of his partner’s body, “I... I... want... your... other... arm!” (Kramer, *Faggots* 338). This could all be easily interpreted as

simple sexual euphemism, but ensuing conversation about Dinky lends it more topically as Irving asks, “That Dinky, he is all yours, Ike?,” to which we’re informed, “As much as he’s anybody’s,” a being whose existence now belongs in the hands of other men completely (Kramer, *Faggots* 339). Kramer explicitly describes a group of people in this setting, a sodality, a willing sect of people, who have acquired Dinky’s personhood as he engages in sex. His identity is thus formed under sex and handed to Kramer’s sense of sodality.

It is important to note Timmy’s orgy and Boo Boo’s stunt on Fire Island, along with Dinky’s coition, are indivisible from Kramer’s understanding of gay culture. For Kramer, sex is culture, and Kit agrees: “The novel starts with various characters in promiscuous relationships. They are looking for potential relationships everywhere... During the process, they gradually turn into characters who practice masochism and sadism, in which it becomes a habit and lifestyle” (507). Kit’s argument explicitly states that the sodality made up from behaviors of sadomasochism lodges the entire novel’s cast, although she calling attention to Timmy and Boo Boo specifically (510). Their practices form a culture of honed individuation in this manner, “That then solidifies the codependency amongst the characters but thus, losing their individuality which they so seek” (509). Codependency is an essential term in Kit’s statement, as it means these characters are relying on one another as they interact. Relying and acting codependently requires bonds between men that when accompanied by a mores, in this case, sexual interaction, forms something of a culture. All the same, Kit describes Kramer’s view of this sodality as one that in establishing codependency attacks identity and blurs the

distinction between one individual from the next. If this is the manner in which sex is treated under gay sodality, the vulnerability imposed by HIV/AIDS can only

At the novel's conclusion, Fred Lemish has become certain of his dissatisfaction with his location within a gay sodality and makes the active decision to leave it. The passage in which he comes to this conclusion argues best for what Kramer considers to be the distance between gay individual and gay culture in *Faggots* as Fred rips himself from what he had previously been stuck in: "Well, I've examined. Now I must fight hard not to let them bring me down and back to thingdom... Now it's time to just *be*. Just like I have brown eyes. I'm here I'm not gay. I'm not a fairy. I'm not a fruit. I'm not queer... And I'm not a faggot. I'm a Homosexual Man. I'm Me" (Kramer, *Faggots* 361). The interval between "Me" and "faggot" here seems to be in the ability to pronounce one's distinct identity, yet, the pinnacle of Kramer's sexual distaste comes in Dinky doing the same thing as he screams his name, just like Boo Boo as he slips into the pit of sexuality. Fred seems to refer to a group of actors or independent individuals when he uses "they," but in this sense, "they" is made from its behaviors, the bringing down "to thingdom," the reduction, objectivation and individuation enforced within mores. Just as Kramer appropriates notions of camp to reject gay sexual practice, in denouncing fagotry, Kramer can only admit his characters to it.

The action of gay sodality as Kramer understands it, of course, is wildly different from Holleran's understanding. Though gay self and gay sodality separate themselves from one another in each, they behave in irreconcilably different ways between each novel. Kramer's fetters and binds gay men inside of it, altering identity, manacling selfhood and consuming the soul. Timmy is "devoured by ten men" before

emerging as initiated, engaged in sadomasochism; Dinky is “dis-splayed” in a scene of public sex, and bodies, finally, are pressed into an indistinctive mass, “entangled in arms and punches and grunts, bodies and arms and pressures exerted ineffectually in wrong directions” (Kramer, *Faggots* 131, 334, 151). The nature of gay sodality in *Dancer from the Dance*, however, stays more distinct from its constituents, subtly leaving its mark from a less definite distance. It’s a doctrinal action, relocating individuals into a new dogmatic practice that is simultaneously revelatory and somehow unholy as well. The sacerdotal agency in gay sodality, in effect, imprisons its residents to “habit” and “love,” possessing them with visions of tempting faces they become confronted with on their deathbeds, doomed to recall in totality the faces of those who they could not attain (Holleran, *Dancer* 132, 139, 134). Holleran writes, “It was the most beautiful illusion of homosexuals and romantics alike: if only I’d loved that one...” installing the tortuous guilt of unmet affection and unrealized love in the near-Catholic institution of gayness. For all its beauties and temptations, it is ultimately a cursed establishment (*Dancer* 220).

Despite these notable differences in execution, both texts share several characteristics in their approach. The incorporeal body of queerness Holleran and Kramer constructs in their respective novels ultimately roots itself in actual, physical places that transform into wildly new landscapes as the gay sodality blights and rearranges them in markedly different impressions than they would have once been before. Of course, the actual makeup of these places is not significantly different – no homosexual renovation or remodeling is conducted either in reality or over the course of these novels – but as if the sensations and emotions felt about these places were



tangible forces, they paint and repurpose each somatic location as a more metaphysical space.

Both Holleran and Kramer insist that New York City is possessed with the lingering shadows of gay culture. The ambiance, the construction, the smell and aesthetic of the world pushed down so heavily by mores that it all appears different to those engaged in it, as if something soft and malleable straining at its edges. Gay sodality makes East Village “almost sensual for a spell” in the heat of *Dancer from the Dance*, “the hot gloom of lust” lifts and moves within bathhouses, the city literally “swallowed them up, and they led that strenuous life that existed for us in the newspapers, if there” (Holleran 194, 154, 139). Holleran describes it as “a certain ragged edge of human nerves in that part of town – a fine line between human life and violence” that even saturates Malone’s home, “like a big blue mosque in the center of that neighborhood” (*Dancer* 139). The image of a Mosque, which houses the “prisoner of love” Malone has become, stands as an especially impactful image where the religious force of sex becomes literally enshrined as a holy building (Holleran, *Dancer* 139). The streets and neighborhoods begin manifesting the interiority of characters, “now the perfect outer counterpart of his inner state: Its filth and ugliness corresponded to his lust” (Holleran, *Dancer* 149). When Malone eventually comes to “a kind of truce with the city... its faces no longer kept him there against his will,” the way mores and sodality have merged with city becomes more apparent (Holleran, *Dancer* 215). To remove himself from sodality, he must literally negotiate with the physical world until he can be free from its confines.

The locality of *Faggots* immediately resembles something closer to what Kramer would color as a hellscape, albeit one rooted in explicit reality. Whereas Holleran often registers New York in lush colors and an ethereal and deceptive warmth, Kramer's palette works to magnify that heat until it melts the city by its edges, drowning and scalding the pitiful souls unable to escape its grasp. The imagery is visually oppressive, even literally fascist. Kramer as a Jewish writer is keen to compare Jewish experience with gay experience, especially in describing ideological properties of physical locations. In *The American People Volume One Search for My Heart*, he writes, "Jews and homosexuals are considered the greatest sinners... Jews are also considered to be the most lascivious of people until the homosexuals come along. Until then Jews are every era's homosexuals, accused of everything in sight. So killed they both are. Over and over and over again. It has never been a good time to be a Jew or a homosexual" (56 - 57).

Kramer's ideological link with Judaism and homosexuality tints the aesthetic manner in which he decries physical locations. Cruising grounds are a "huge black hole," the gay streets of New York are a transfixing deadfall – "*the streets... The Streets, Gay Ghetto, homo away from home, the hierarchy and ritual of the Streets, incessant, insinuating, impossible Streets... everyone dressed alike!*, Hitler could recruit right here" (Kramer, *Faggots* 68, 110). The Everhard Baths are "Rancid and ratty... [an] outpost of civilized behavior and democracy in action... redolent smell combined the distinct odors of popper, dope, spit, shit, piss and a very of lubricants," all of which characterize it as a "temple of sex" (Kramer, *Faggots* 156 - 157). Kramer binds these localities with rites and practices that further ensnare gay men into a feedback loop of

destructive sex and customs. As I'll argue later, much of Kramer's vision of gay New York, but Fire Island in particular, relies specifically on Nazi aestheticism for its characterization as a singular hell.

Kramer and Holleran apply these qualities to the very real places they are interested in within their novels as well, namely the fabled Fire Island and Everard (or "Everhard" as Kramer refers to it throughout *Faggots*) Baths. The physical construction of these places is important, but the reoriented nature of how gay culture possesses them speaks to how both authors characterize queer sodality.

The Everard Baths, in particular, remains as famous for its cultural influence as it does for a fire that claimed nine lives of its patrons in 1977. For both Kramer and Holleran, the event remains a staggering turnabout for how gay men view their lifestyles within their work and a queer culture at large: it inverses carefree expression of sexuality with immediate and visual death. As Kramer describes the baths as "a world in microcosm, human life reduced to its most simplistic," the death and ruination incited by the fire reads as especially meaningful (*Faggots* 157).

In a single, unbroken sentence, Kramer reproduces the scene of the fire chiefly through present bodies and sexualities:

They grabbed their clothes and ran... joining hundreds of other running bodies, naked, Dorothy Lamour-clad, or in part attire, cocks swinging out in fear, or shriveled up in same, or still erected from interrupted orgasms and pointing the way down, joining hundreds more on the second floor, where were the fucking sprinklers?!!, the one stairway now almost impenetrable with smoke and brothers climbing over brothers, bodies that only moments before were touching

in more passionate ways, trampling over older ones not able to push and shove...

(*Faggots* 176)

The corporeal form of men takes precedence over the actual fire in Kramer's depiction of horror, filling the halls of the baths with bodies before the actual flames and smoke incinerating the structure around them. What animates tension in this scene is the overoccupancy of the male form, acting as overfull contents (later in the scene, literally as a liquid substance, "Grandma's chicken soup, a blazing cauldron of somebody's bubbalahs, a potent portion of rear ends") enacting violence on one another (Kramer, *Faggots* 176). It's the young men stampeding over older ones, it's the football-esque rampage of men fighting each other to survive. In one article of the several hundred word sentence, Kramer even actively describes the bodies as "fuel," writing "flames could not be seen grabbing toward the... further fuel of naked men, all tackling fate like football players" (*Faggots* 176). Every figure is anonymously characterized by their relation to sex – they are men reduced to their most basic and carnal form as sexual, vapid creatures that run one another over to save themselves. In relating sex so intensely to the death at hand here, Kramer characterizes the bathhouse like a gas chamber, not in an unsimilar fashion to how he describes relates to one in *Search for My Heart*: "They are whispering and that's when I hear 'concentration camp,'" he writes, describing, "and then 'gas chamber...' You don't just drop a penis like Tibby's into the narrative and let it go" (575). In the same fashion Kramer describes the death and heat of the bathhouse in comparison to penises and sex, he relates them in *Search for My Heart* to gas chambers as well.

Yet even in a scene of panic, Kramer masks the scene in faint humor as he refers to classically gay icons, Dorothy Lamour in this instance, and creates a spectacle from the calamity occurring. “This place was meant to be safe!!,” reads as a joking aside, registered unbrokenly in the voice of those present (Kramer, *Faggots* 176). The comparison to football, contextually suggesting an erotic masculinity, reads comically when juxtaposed with the image of nude men battering one another. It’s a sort of dramatic irony that punishes and bemoans gay men in the same stroke. Kramer’s sense of humor grotesquely disciplines and penalizes its victims first, threatening them with literal fire and death, then doubles back with a sort of existential farce that turns the horror into a kind of human comedy of errors.

All the same, Kramer closes the scene, “But it would be several days before the bodies, any bodies, could be identified” (*Faggots* 176). The narrator’s anonymous and unwavering statistical register of homosexual men comes to a front in this moment, reducing individual members into the same faceless mass that he implements at the novel’s onset. The effect is tragic, disturbing: men abandoning one another, perishing and dying without absconding the triteness of their intimacy, in fact remaining finitely entombed in it.

In one sequence, Sutherland in *Dancer from the Dance* makes a similar observation to what Kramer describes: “he began to look around for an emergency exit (we all would have been snuffed out in a minute had that place caught on fire, as was the case with nearly every place we went, from baths to bars to discotheques): ‘If there was a fire in this place, darling, no one would be a hero’” (Holleran, *Dancer* 113).

When that fire does occur much later in the novel, it appears as a mythic backdrop to the sudden disappearance of Malone:

The rumor had become generally accepted that he had died himself, in the flames of the Everard Baths... Malone had gone up in flames with the sleazy mattresses, the queens waking up in drugged confusion in a stranger's arms to find the walls in flame around them, the hundred and thirty beds on which he had adored so many dark-eyed angels like a man drinking at a holy spring.

Holleran not only forgoes the comedic inclusion of the letter *h* that Kramer accents his description of the baths with, he also relates sexuality differently to the scene than *Faggots* does. The victims of the fire are still known foremost by sex, wrapped in each other's arms and described in the beds they share, but here, however, they are not described as a pool of bodies toppling over one another in macabre terror, instead taking on the form of holy angelic figures, risen from the trappings they had been condemned to. As we've seen, this is hardly the first instance in which Holleran describes gay men as angels, and here, it demonstrates the fundamental difference between these two as Holleran visualizes melodramatic tragedy and Kramer registers his own tragedy in camp that moves between the disturbing and the amusing.

Finally, the climatic Fire Island represents an essential turning point for each novel's protagonist. Seized by gay sodality, the location is for both authors the last borne of a homosexual mores, the final extension of what damaging action culturalism can take on the individual. Kramer is most forthright in his portrayal of it as a singular perdition, the absolute terminal of what mores can make: "For if, as 'tis said, it takes a faggot make something pretty, they have outdone themselves on this Island of Fire"

(*Faggots* 266). He goes on to emphasize that the island is the ultimate ideal within his vision of gay culturalism, a “garden of delights” (Kramer, *Faggots* 359).

His understanding of Fire island cannot be separated from the holocaust and concentration camps, the scene filled with both literal Neo Nazis and fascist treatment that takes the aesthetic form of Nazism. Randy Dildough attends a Nazi party, and he “[stands] in front of a group of Nazis. They were having a circle jerk. Just like boys’ camp, school dorm, or army barracks” (Kramer, *Faggots* 326). It is unexceptional, it is traditional practice, it is familiar in the variety of settings he lists as comparative examples. As Boo Boo later hallucinates under the influence of an ambiguous drugging, he begs his father for the money he ‘kidnaps’ himself for as they are surrounded by approaching Nazis. His father asks in some kind of horror, “Richie... we are perhaps in some concentration camp?” as he observes the very Pit of Sexuality his son had thrown himself into (Kramer, *Faggots* 343).

Initially, the presence of Nazism is no doubt off-putting. Applying theory from *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question*, however, provides a correlation between Kramer’s depiction of a self-destructive mores and his inclusion of Nazi imagery. Janet R. Jakobsen’s “Queers Are Like Jews, Aren’t they?” posits that the rhetoric device in comparing LGBTQ individuals to a Jewish population fundamentally represents a generalizing and problematic connection stemmed from Nazi efforts to associate Jews with money and capital through abstraction as a means of essentializing discrimination (76). The act of abstracting constitutes violence for Jakobsen: “Because homosexuals took up a position that could in the post-Holocaust moment stand in for Jews, the invisible threat of ‘homosexuality’ could be considered similarly abstract and in need of

surveillance so as to rout out possible subversives.” (77). As Kramer displays the often effects of Fire Island within sodality, its ramifications and tangibly represented consequences signify the same fascist form of discrimination in how sodality abstracts the individual into numbers, masses and anonymously rendered instruments of sex. The presence of Nazism in this manner cements Fire Island as the logical extent of Kramer’s fully realized, physically manifested mores and all its potential devastation.

Much has already been said of Holleran’s depiction of Fire Island as chapters utilizing it as their setting are significantly rooted in how Holleran characterizes culture in a larger sense. Bergman notes evocatively that “Through his heightened lyricism, [Holleran] spreads across the island a kind of fairy tale magic that he paradoxically hopes will capture the more salient reality of Fire Island in the ’70s” (Leap 104 - 105). The landscape is indeed gorgeously rendered in surreal language where Malone feels as if “he had found Paradise his first visit to Fire Island” (Holleran, *Dancer* 207). In the same antithetical holiness that sodality wrangles gay men into, however, it is also slanted by an uncanny sense of death: “This ‘odd sensation of death’ is both both the elegiac recollection of the golden past and the poleptic vision of everyone’s... impending demise” (Holleran, *Dancer* 111). This is the final admonition from Holleran; what is gorgeous and promising, the revelation one may have been immersed in, may very well prove deadly. And for Sutherland, it does.

As Kramer criticizes public sex, he misses an essential point in the polemic he uses to try and forge a vision of gay sodality in which sex remains a private, monogamous event shared in an illusory private. “The legal difference between public and private sex is not a simple matter of choosing either the bushes or your bedroom,”



writes Califia. “There are many zones in between... that are contested territory where police battle with perverts for control” (19).

At this point, two very divergent renditions of gay sodality have emerged. In recognizing the structural framework in which Kramer and Holleran characterize homosexual sodality and mores, they both see a culture that acts, harshly, on its constituents. Both of their protagonists navigate culturalism before reaching a conclusion on its nature, then, confronted on Fire Island with the most undiluted tableaux of what gay sodality is, make the choice to tear themselves from it. As gay identity and gay culture remain distinct, this does not take the shape of a denouncement of homosexual being, but rather the social institution, the mores, of gayness. Variations occur in what that gay sodality’s actions ultimately amount to.

Looking at these texts in comparison with one another is necessary in detecting what the precise qualities of this sodality are. The most obviously pressing difference rests in the portrayal of eroticism and intimacy, where Kramer is instantly repulsed by the mores’s expression of sex, as Bergman so articulately agrees, “Kramer satirizes the contention that public sex is beautiful and seeks to reveal it as base, vulgar exhibitionism” (Leap 107). He forcefully pushes back on any belief that ‘promiscuous,’ non-monogamous sex can be a positive force, while Holleran finds a duplicitous but romantic ease in its presence. The gay mores and its accompanying sexual practices reveal individuality and selfhood through false piety in *Dancer from the Dance*, as flawed and fundamentally dangerous as it ends up being, while it individuates and completely relegates the self in *Faggots*.

Accordingly, the behavior of gay sodality can be described as such for each author when placed in conjunction with one another: Holleran's mores behaves as a spiritual agent that introduces facets of identity – often unfavorable ones – to those it interacts with, Kramer's ensnares men in its body and deconstructs their identities, refashioning them into unfamiliar conformations. As the structural framework of these sodalities comes under pressure from massively felt cultural trauma in the form of HIV/AIDS in the next chapter, I'll rely on these definitions as a foundational base to compare from.

## **Chapter 2: The Only Safe Place Left: Trauma, Death, Sex and Community in Post-Epidemic Kramer and Holleran**

There is too much popular discourse that refers to *Faggots* in some way as prophetic, prescient or fatidic of what was to come of gay men and men who have sex with men in the 1980s. Reynolds Price's very introduction to the novel describes the text as "a prophecy of a sort that's virtually impossible to match in the prior history of satire in English" (Kramer, *Faggots* XI). Yet *Faggots* makes no argument toward the future. What it does is display in unyielding, excruciating detail the state of the 'house,' as Kramer refers to gay culture on Emerald City TV (O'Dowd). It berates, satirizes and excoriates homosexual living and characterizes exterior culture as a sodality that acts independently, warning of the fate of the individual who remains implicated in its grasp. All the same, it unambiguously does not forecast the death of hundreds of thousands of men. It says nothing of HIV/AIDS.

Regardless, *Faggots*' denunciatory tone gave the impression that Kramer was expecting something like the HIV/AIDS epidemic all along. Only several years after the publication of his novel and a handful of months into the late winter of 1983, Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC), a communal action front founded in part by Kramer, were befuddled with formulating a reaction to the playwright and novelist's incendiary letter to the *New York Native*, titled "1,112 and Counting" (Shilts 244). GMHC were horrified at the blatant unfriendliness Kramer showed to both *The New York Times* and queer medical professionals who Kramer had characterized as ineffective as he called for action and concern in gay spaces (Shilts 245). The reaction to Kramer's anger in

1983 was not unlike the reaction to his anger in 1978: audiences were shocked, threatened and upset with how they had been portrayed as indifferent, apathetic. “Endless letters poured into the *Native*, denouncing Kramer as an ‘alarmist’ who was rabidly ‘sex-negative’ and was using AIDS to deliver his post-*Faggots* ‘I told you so’” (Shilts 245).

Three more years and thousands of lives claimed by AIDS related illnesses later and we finally arrive at where this project begins, the debut of *The Normal Heart* at the Public Theater. *The Normal Heart* remains a wrenching viewing experience, an exercise in exposed pain, hardship and loss. It has also, as time has tested, become a much beloved and massively reproduced piece of theatre, having been adapted into an Emmy award winning HBO film with a screenplay by Kramer himself. This context may seem unnecessary, but here I look to Simon Watney writing in *Policing Desire*:

“representation is not merely a reflection of ‘real life’, but an integral part of it. In times of crisis we can see cultures concentrating on themselves, and their profiles are telling” (4). The ‘real life’ in this sense plays a direct role in the composition of these texts as Kramer reproduces his life for both *The Normal Heart* and *The Destiny of Me*. Even had his drama avoided autobiography, the emotional reality of these texts and their treatment by the public speak an important truth about the nature of these narratives, and the angry fervor inspired by them only shows how Kramer’s writing remarks communally to gay sodality.

The disparity in reception between *Faggots* and *The Normal Heart* is a notable demonstration in the issue of presentation. Both texts, in essence, source their criticism from the same wells: in one scene, protagonist Ned Weeks laments, “When are we

going to admit we might be spreading this? We have simply fucked ourselves silly for years and years, and sometimes we've done it in the filthiest places" (Kramer, *Heart* 94). The dialogue hardly sounds contrastive to a conversation held between Fred and Dinky in the latter half of *Faggots*: "You've already fucked half of New York... I've fucked the other half... Why can't you imagine something better? I dare you to change! And try for something better!" (Kramer, *Faggots* 320). But the divergence arrives in presentation, Fred's comments dismissed with a joke about Dinky's noncommittal behavior, Ned's reinforced by distinct frustration and denial. The tone of *Faggots* is darkly comedic satire and the tone of *The Normal Heart* is unadulterated, embittered tragedy.

With that in mind, it seems appropriate to call attention to the issue of comparing theatre to literature which, of course, engineers some stresses in formal analysis. How themes, ideas, characters and plot are communicated to the audience is irrevocably different; *The Normal Heart* and its sequel, *The Destiny of Me*, cannot lay the heavy hand of direct characterization that *Faggots* so often does, nor can it speak as diametrically as first person digressions do in his first novel. Instead, characters speak to one another, to themselves and to no one at all, the writerly influence still present, but the agency in reception growing biased toward the audience as the power moves from speaker to character. The result from this transformation is a dramatic maneuver into a communally realized realm of conditional empathy. *Faggots* is sneering and often unfeeling while *The Normal Heart's* subject is immediately personal and largely autobiographical, and for it, all the more universal as David M. Halperin writes in *How to be Gay*, "The more personal [grief and anger] were, the more exemplary they could

come to seem – exemplary of gay men’s suffering, loss, and victimization *as a group*.... Far from being limited to the personal, grief and anger propelled gay identity further into the public sphere” (79). Grief, anger, frustration and fear are among *The Normal Heart* and *The Destiny of Me*’s most prevalent emotions, just as they are for Holleran’s work in *The Beauty of Men* and *Grief*. And it is in this shared boundary of a performance of suffering that a universal language appears for assessing these texts on a common field.

With any performance of suffering inherently comes some essence of camp in its function, and the most hysterically emotional moments of both Holleran and Kramer’s later work are registered in a way that would not seem out of place in a gay reaction of *Mildred Pierce* or *Mommie Dearest*. Halperin describes queer readings of the career of Joan Crawford, who, “excelled in the portrayal of strong women who nonetheless fall victim, at least for a while, to the potential *horror* and *tragedy* of normal family life” (152). Both of Holleran’s later novels and Kramer’s *The Destiny of Me* especially capitalize on these same foundations; they are obsessed with the grotesque and disturbing realities of family life that would *seem* inappropriate to laugh at. Yet, just as Halperin explains as he elucidates the gay experience of viewing Joan Crawford, simple analysis of that laughter would miss the important designation of the “cultural response – such as the intensity of the identification with the female star, or the depth of intoxication with her dramatic situation” (Halperin 152). That identification and drama in the seemingly hopeless situation provides these authors with an unlikely door into actively participating in gay sodality as they define its difficulties. Here, the comedy within each performance of suffering can be derived from the utter extremity of

what horror and misery has transpired. What must be done next to understand this function is the characterization and assessment of the extraordinary suffering at play.

The performance of suffering shares different executions between Holleran and Kramer, particularly in regards to its relationship with gay sodality. While each author exhibits rage, despair, anxiety and hopelessness throughout their writing, the source of those feelings, the consequences of them and the finality reached in reconciling with them manifest separately under gay sodality. As the tension between Kramer and Holleran's understanding of gay sodality revealed the particular qualities of each in comparison with one another, the distinct expressions of cultural trauma provisionally speak to the nature of tragedy and experienced agony, along with what it means for the effect of gay sodality in a world where leagues of men suddenly perish from an illness that had only recently been named at the time of *The Normal Heart's* premiere.

Holleran's later work may contain the most clearly pronounced thematic shift in the distance between *Nights in Aruba*, a melancholic if still reminiscent look on one gay man's relationship with his family, and the grim *The Beauty of Men*, published in 1997. Where the bathhouses of New York remained a singular entity within gay sodality in Holleran's later work, the experienced desolation of *The Beauty of Men* makes certain "the whole world now becomes the baths" (*Beauty* 232). The novel follows 47-year-old New York refugee, Lark, gone from the city to escape a climate of death and advancing meaninglessness. Purportedly, he relocates himself to Florida as a means of remaining close to his now paralyzed mother, but he struggles to pronounce his genuine identity to her, unable to come out or express the true practices his life within gay sodality entails. Where he once attended the vibrant clubs, bathhouses and discotheques of New York,

he now populates a sparse and cadaverous boat ramp known for local cruising. He lusts for the appearance of a short-lived affection, the elusive Becker, who he endlessly fantasizes creating a monogamous and fulfilling life with. He goes to the gym in a state of self-deprecation, he stalks the man he shared a fleeting encounter with and he plummets only deeper into a fatalist spiral of misery. The novel's conclusion sees Lark's mother dead, thrust into the void and perpetually uninformed of her child's actuality; it also sees Becker's immutable rejection of Lark and the death, it seems, of any hope at all. In its closing scene, *The Beauty of Men* depicts Lark's return to the boat ramp, where he in utter dejection, "sits there in his car till dark, without once getting out; while other people wonder who it is and finally drive off, tired of waiting," entirely alone, unnoticed and invisible to any other being (Holleran 272).

Holleran tells *The Beauty of Men* in a single narrative voice unlike the animated multitude of perspectives that channel sodality in *Dancer from the Dance*. It is in close third person, present tense, frequently dipping into Lark's first person conscious as he grows increasingly more conflicted toward his sexuality along with his mother's health. With his relationship with sodality strained, the free and direct discourse that appears in *Dancer...* to display the dance of gay sodality, *The Beauty of Men* utilizes it to articulate dejection and pain inflicted by that culture. Confronting the truth that he may never be able to attain Becker, Lark in one scene looks for solace in a trip to a semi-local bathhouse. Yet, the bathhouse, the congregation within it, demonstrates a feature of sodality Holleran characterizes as troublesome: "this is what we do when we come to these places, he thinks – reduce ourselves to body parts. Only now my outside no longer resembles my inside... People with rings in their nipples and shaved heads stare at me"



(*Beauty* 214- 215). This transmutation from individual to single body parts is something that will occur again in Holleran, but here, the motion from third person to first articulates the certain pain experienced by the individual against the institution. It begins with the marker “he thinks” before forming sentences centered on the pronoun “I” as Lark’s discomfort in the scene develops. It also denotes the divide between rural and urban identity Holleran pulls on throughout to articulate how sodality works.

*Dancer’s...* pastoral fascination with the landscape of New York has been replaced with a dull and tireless consternation at the crushingly remote milieu of Florida, and its crestfallen inhabitants are creatures no longer dazzled by the limitless possibility of urban gay living, but are rather immobile things, divorced from urban gay living entirely. Holleran describes the gay men of this particular part of Florida as lifelessly as I suggest here, imbuing them with sarcastic and vicious cues from “the handsome plumber on the motorcycle who used to fart on cue and ended up murdering a court reporter” to “the Mean Cold Queen, a gaunt man with a shaved head and expression of discontent so deep Lark cannot imagine what would please him” (Holleran, *Beauty* 10, 222). This strangeness and narrative coolness is the titular beauty of men and it is a hollow, haunting, funny thing – a certain despair derived from sodality and the desire for something better. The only men celebrated are those Lark admires for their beauty from afar, the beautiful heterosexual young men he dreams of devoting his life to. All the same, sodality – no matter how physically it appears to have been removed from these characters – encumbers gay men in *The Beauty of Men* with a possessive listlessness that in longing for a past or different life mars them in existential gloom.

The mindset of Lark and his few peers as it concerns their non-urban locality operates within a “‘spatialized landscape’ of queer mourning and melancholia...,” as Scott Herring describes in *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism*, “A ‘spatialized landscape...’ enables us to see that queer identifications are often just as dependent on geographical identifications that involve phantasmatic forms of opportunity lost and gained, disavowal and displacement, conscious and unconscious renunciation” (172). Herring relates queer melancholia to placement and locality, arguing that relational experience configures into the making of self and that that same process is irrevocably one laced with forlornness, thus making the queer melancholia he describes. He goes on to posit this melancholia and the habitation of a spatialized landscape as directly tangential to the “If Only,” the narrative fantasy of a more desirable elsewhere, whether it be for its opportunities, sexual culture or resources, all of which Herring touches on in the passage (170). In operation, this “If Only” in fact takes on its own sense of physical space: “When ‘if only’ is invoked, it’s like you’re stuck in a land of lost opportunities” (Herring 170).

The spatialized landscape, and the If Onlys within it, gives credence to notions of cultural trauma not relayed in Alexander’s volume of essays introduced in the introduction, *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, embodying Lark’s unhappiness and its effects on his character. The tragedy here is that Lark’s residency in rural Florida immeasurably distances him from the artifice of happiness he once had in New York. All the same, trauma has fragmented Lark’s If Only and even his longing for gay urban culture has grown corrupt under the oppressive weight of AIDS. In one early sequence, he recalls examining *The Forge of Vulcan* in New York with his friend Sutcliffe: “The

men in it were still beautiful... their faces awestruck in the presence of the glowing god— as he himself had once been, those first years in New York, stepping into the hallways of the Everard -- but everything else had crumbled, including his friend” (Holleran, *Beauty* 38). Even when fantasizing about high schoolers and anonymous men passing by, Lark cannot help but falter as he positions them as an embodiment of the If Only: “I bring you all the desire for Love that town engenders in me,” he muses in one passage, “including the young high-school student buying cigarettes,” effectively stationing the unattainable within his fantasy (Holleran, *Beauty* 227). This fantasy completely collapses two pages later, Holleran writing:

I bring all of this to you... through neon and strip mall, gas station and supermarket, an ocean of moving metal... *not* the stomach of the boy at the Jiffy buying cigarettes... the whole erotic force that makes me come here to discharge my desire, like something ricocheting off someone else, so stupid, so pointless, so neurotic, but all I’ve got” (*Beauty* 229).

Lark compares the object of his fleeting desire, the high school student, against the locality, the moving metal sea and neon lights, that at once stand for the entire time and Lark’s own desires. Even with the pain he experiences, he makes sure to accent that it is all he has.

Lark’s If Only most consequently appears in the form of his idealized vision of his relationship with Becker, made all the more enforceable by the non-urban environment where the distance between the two becomes even more pronounced:

Truly sociable people move to the city, thinks Lark. It’s the stubborn, self-reliant types who prefer small towns. The real American is a loner -- like Becker. Who

just happens to drive me crazy. If I were truly to express how I feel about him, thinks Lark, there would be nothing left on the bed when we got through but a little pile of bones, like the relics of a saint. That's all. Gone. Devoured.

Consumed utterly: his hair, his lean muscles, his huge, soft balls. I'd be sitting there belching quietly and picking pubic hair out of my teeth, he thinks, like a fat man after eating six dozen oysters. Perhaps that's why he stays away -- he knows this is what awaits him: extinction, he thinks as he picks up his glass of iced tea. (Holleran, *Beauty* 118)

This is an especially evocative passage, not only describing Becker's functionality within the *If Only*, but also the precise operations of sexuality within a non-urban environment. If Lark were able to express his feelings to Becker, here aestheticized as the pinnacle of non-urban allure and ensuingly eroticized for it, he imagines he would only be able to consume and digest his beloved. The sex the two would share within Lark's *If Only* deconstructs Becker to his basest parts, not unlike how Kramer describes bodies engaged in gay sodality in *Faggots*, repurposing each segment until there's nothing left but scraps to pick out from Lark's teeth. This displays the fault in Lark's fantasy and the gap in desires he experiences. Just as Becker defaults to pieces of an entombed saint, the revelatory iconography of faith and theism that invigorates *Dancer from the Dance* literally crumbles in this non-urban Florida, the location of Becker's home ironically located adjacent to "a church with a portable sign that says YOU STAND TALL WHEN YOU KNEEL FOR JESUS," both an obvious joke on oral sex and a condemnation on Lark's desire (Holleran, *Beauty* 238). This departure from the pious depiction of sex in *Dancer*... displays the transformation of sentiment through

the If Only, converting beautiful possibilities into a grotesque reality that pronounces what horror exists for gay men traumatized by sodality.

The work of the If Only in these cases is to display the severe distance between the lamentable state of Lark's reality and what he wishes it to be. Herring describes the fundamental instability in the If Only as that the "'if only' keeps you going but it can get you nowhere fast. It can be the equivalent of a narratological roundabout" (170). Indeed, the If Only is what keeps Lark animated, what motors him into the previously described erotic force, but it also locks him only more securely to the hopelessness of his state. I point to this impossible span so that my argument as to how gay sodality acts in relation to AIDS becomes more clear: the mores of gay sodality when positioned in accordance to the HIV/AIDS epidemic is latently and dangerously broken, malignantly dysfunctional, just as the pain of Lark's gay ideals have only isolated him further from them.

What should first be made evident is that the HIV/AIDS epidemic is, within both Kramer and Holleran, its own distinct agent. Holleran makes no short work of establishing this, AIDS constantly acting in horrific fashion upon his friends, his community and himself as well: "Laughter was one of those joys the plague eliminated, the way it eliminated everything else. There was just one affect now: Sad" (*Beauty* 245). It maintains a physical presence as it acts as well, repurposing space in a way far more dramatic than gay sodality's many reorientations in both *Dancer from the Dance* and *Faggots* as "the accumulated sadness of Joshua's last year... still pent up in the room, like some monster in a cursed tomb" (Holleran, *Beauty* 245). Joshua is an important figure in Lark's past, a young man and roommate to Lark who commits

suicide after becoming possessed by a certain loneliness. Holleran utilizes reflections to equate AIDS to unconventional death – a death that simultaneously does and does not actually physically kill. AIDS is death. AIDS kills, even without the act of killing (“That Joshua died before he killed himself”) (Holleran, *Beauty* 244).

Holleran’s performance of suffering may appear on first read as impossibly grim. Its narrative force refuses to ignore Lark’s gravest thoughts and its plot is unrelentingly punishing as it extinguishes any aspiration for mutual affection with Becker before it murders his mother, Lark never able to bear his realest self to her. The novel ends where it started, at the boat ramp, with all its featured atrocities and hardships endured for naught. This is the work of AIDS as an agent, obliterating all hope and halting development and formation of identity. *The Beauty of Men* is horrified by both AIDS and gay sodality, and in conjunction, horrified by death.

Despite the lengths I’ve gone to in the name of establishing how dire and nightmarish these stresses are, it all, in fact, manages to be somewhat funny. The novel’s misery is so impossible to fathom, “so grim in aura extended to the fact,” as Holleran writes, that to comprehend its unknowable horror is to fact find it all somewhat comedic. “Gay loss never quite rises to the level of tragedy,” Halperin writes. “No would-be gay tragedy can escape a faint tinge of ridiculousness” (180). The ridiculousness here is in the narrative voice that punctuates the plot’s genuine horror with dark jabs about genitals and human existence. In one scene Lark, having just returned from a particularly depressed visit with his mother, laments:

A sacrifice for science. That’s Mum, he thinks... A pleasant air of exhaustion hangs over Burger King, Pie ‘N Save, McDonald’s. He puts a tape into the

machine, presses the button, listens to the adagio swell, and thinks, as he drives on, I've exchanged my mother for a Mozart piano concerto; I've turned her, like Peneus turning Daphne into a tree, into music. And now I need something very gay. And he drives straight to Gaytalk. (*Beauty* 68)

The tragedy here is clear. Lark is alone, depressed and tormented over his mother's health, and the only way he can drown his misery is in the drenches of a gay bar he goes on to endlessly bemoan. Yet all of that tragedy is reliant on comedy to make it clear as Holleran accents the aura of fast food chains and slants Mozart and a Greek allusion into a sudden need to go hunting for hookups at a desolate gay bar. It is impossible to read lines describing such intense suffering like, "this is what happens when we leave New York and our friends all die. We lose our bearings! We end up on the Lido in Venice with mascara running down our cheeks!" without seeing the camp of ridiculousness and tragedy that has transpired (Holleran, *Beauty* 44).

Holleran often pauses action to add asides that read with sarcastic grate; take a scene at the boat ramp, for instance, where a young man approaches Lark. "'The young man grunts, 'Hello,' and Lark, astonished, can barely manage a 'Hello' after he has passed,'" he writes in a late novel scene. "That glare, that intensity, he thinks, can only mean one thing: Food. Him. In the great food chain of Life, the Filipino wishes to devour Lark's protein product" (*Beauty* 186). The sudden negation of Lark's being into food and the transformation of his sexuality into a literal protein product is both disturbing and dehumanizing but also sincerely comedic. It is moments like these that capitalize on the desolation and unwieldy aspects of gay sodality to call attention to the consequences of gay sodality, yet finding humor in it as well. The should-be tragic

victims of gay sodality littering the novel's text, like the aforementioned motorcycle murderer, the patrons of the bathhouse and even Lark, are all positioned into stances where they represent abject tragedy so fully it in turn enters the realm of the ridiculous.

Holleran finds the body especially amusing, particularly in its relationship to AIDS. "He had to admit... his friends' death and suffering from AIDS, do not really horrify him on an immediate daily basis the way his rapidly receding hairline does," he writes, stratifying the tragedy of the epidemic with the comically minute issue of Lark's appearance (Holleran, *Beauty* 71). Lark's amusingly trite concerns, however, are elevated through comedy as a larger diagnosis of gay sodality as he reflects several pages later, "One would think that not having AIDS... would be enough to make you awaken every day in a state of bliss. But no, it's not. You still want a ten-inch dick, a full head of hair, two more decades of unblemished youth, and everyone to want you when you walk into the bar" (Holleran, *Beauty* 73). Comedy, in particular, comedy of the body, enables Holleran to establish the terrifying stress of AIDS on the individual while relating it to larger sodality: "What a sadistic disease for homosexuals," Lark goes on, still beset by his hairline, "who *are* their looks, who *are* their bodies" (Holleran, *Beauty* 72). Halperin writes that this specific sort of comedy in relation to tragedy is important: "The determination to treat as funny what is undeniably heartbreaking is hardly a universal feature of gay male responses to HIV/AIDS. But it is also not untypical, and it expresses an attitude that may well be distinctive to gay culture" (146). This certain humor of bodily destruction and the minute quality of gay concern for appearance is visible throughout queer artistic response to AIDS, from *Diseased Pariah*



*News*'s run of AIDS Barbie features that skewered gay sensibilities pressurized by AIDS to Holleran's sharp cracks against the male form in *The Beauty of Men*.

*The Beauty of Men*'s magnum tragedy and its underlying shades of comedy manifest even more histrionically in Holleran's short novel, *Grief*. Published in 2006, it remains his most recently published work of fiction and also his shortest, only 150 pages in the original hardback printing. Yet its affect is undeniable, a visceral and distressing assault that does not so much strike as it does permeate, filling the novel's Washington DC setting with a permanent haze of mourning in its cultural institutions and physical architecture. The nature of gay sodality's seize on the city is different than it is in New York or the non-urban Florida: it has become a mass mausoleum, a city of death full of shadows of the nation's history. The novel follows an unnamed protagonist, having accepted a teaching position in DC as a means of evading emotional hardship following his mother's death. He eventually forms a faint bond with his landlord, another single, middle-aged gay man, and troubles the nature of his grief as he identifies with the letters and diaries of Mary Todd Lincoln. *Grief's* conclusion sees, once again, an incomplete sense of resolution: the narrator has not overcome his feelings and remains confined within them, returning home to rural Florida where overcome with woe, he collapses to his knees and makes an unanswered prayer.

Holleran links the protagonist's grief, at least as far as it is concerned with his mother's passing, with the lingering sorrow and guilt he suffers from the AIDS epidemic. Each sentiment appears in a gyre with the other, constantly swaying and responding in conjunction with the weight of the opposing force. Both leave him hopeless and wildly isolated, and Holleran's efforts to depict that sensation occupies

much of the text's duration. As if in the same gyre Yeats wrote of some deal of time after the poem *Dancer*... takes its title from, a third accompanying entity appears in Holleran's coil as well. That coil is Mary Todd Lincoln, and the text's references to her are responsible for the camp and registry of gay emotion across the span of the text. In one passage toward the novel's conclusion, Holleran describes his protagonist's effort to impart a final word of wisdom on his students in one section of prose:

I tried to think of something to say to my last class... a warning, in essence, that whether your husband was assassinated beside you as you sat watching a third-rate play, or you tripped on a rug and broke your neck, or were infected in a moment of sexual passion (or boredom, or loneliness) by a fatal virus, life had a way of suddenly flipping, and that something, sometime, somewhere, almost certainly would flip it for them, to one degree or another. (*Grief* 136)

Holleran describes calamity here as he has done so many times before, giving it agency as the very force that acts upon the individual. That force has become complicated with the implications of the death – the death of a mother and death from AIDS. Calamity, and in effect gay sodality, has taken on a new shape. Holleran uses Mary Todd Lincoln in this section as a means of assessing and understanding this new shape. While *The Beauty of Men* only depicts it in its purest form, *Grief* seems more ideologically concerned with the less visceral aspects of it, more so the still moving ripples left by AIDS with Lincoln's writing and character used as a means of presenting them. In an early scene wherein the protagonist discovers a book of her letters in the room he leases, he describes the book's contents, "letters written when she was happy, when everyone was still alive" (Holleran, *Grief* 15). It seems impossible to differentiate Lincoln's grief

from the epidemic where Holleran ensures throughout the text that the primary source of her misery comes from the murder of her husband, all the while the narrator's own emotional registry bleeding into the specific phrase 'everyone.'

The protagonist eventually notes his own obsession with relating Lincoln to the world around him late in the novel, where "the letters of Mrs. Lincoln were starting to be the reference for everything I noticed" (Holleran, *Grief* 68). As a 'reference for everything,' she becomes the model for the landlord's secluded behavior as he operates in and rejects gay sodality, the deathly architecture of Washington DC and then most obviously and poignantly for AIDS literally, depicted in a scene featuring the protagonist's class. In this particularly self-aware moment where the narrator debates the merits of a seventies gay novel in which characters seem motivated by sex, he responds to a student's belief that gay men should have known promiscuity could have been dangerous: "That's like saying Lincoln went to Ford's Theater the night he was shot knowing that's what would happen... Actually he was quite aware of the possibility that it might. But he went anyway. He went and it did happen. And that left everyone else to deal with it – which is what AIDS literature is all about" (Holleran, *Grief* 77). This understanding is then even refuted by the heterosexual student, as he flippantly dismisses the notion of comparing Lincoln's assassination to AIDS. Without subtlety, this scene describes the action of HIV/AIDS as an institution and manages to posit the heterosexual response to it, all within the framework Holleran establishes of Lincoln as an ideogram for grief.

And as a performance of suffering finds some ultimate ridiculousness in the parade of grief and unhappiness, so does Lincoln's presence, providing the novel's sole

but noticeable comic edge. As the protagonist silently relates Washington's homeless population and the dead with Lincoln, infinitely wandering without a place or purpose until death, he and his landlord reach a conclusion. The landlord comments, "Have you ever... read such an insane mixture of self-pity, melodrama, camp, and grief? She rings all the chimes! From a figure whose tragedy no one in American history could match to a conniving, paranoid shopaholic!" (*Grief* 147). Indeed, just as Lincoln represents the tragedy of AIDS and the never ending cycle of grief, she becomes an icon in configuring how comedy functions within the text. The landlord posits her as a figure who cannot overcome her own misery and the death she has seen, thus becoming a figure in the classical melodrama style – aged, paranoid, and obsessed with material interests.

The novel can be read the same way, its circular structure made up exclusively from misery and wherein no resolution can ever be found proving somewhat absurd in its grimness. Once again, Holleran has cut his unsmiling material particularly effectively here, given the novel's central familial conflict with a sense of humor that – certainly more unintentionally than Holleran's work – also slices films like *Mommie Dearest* and *Mildred Pierce*, as Halperin reminds us in *How to Be Gay*: "Unlike tragedy, melodrama does not have to justify its extravagances. It does not have to discipline itself in order to guard against the calamitous possibility that its characters may express more than they really feel... Unlike tragedy, it can make the dramatic performance of passion a value, and a source of pleasure in itself" (280). Whether or not *Grief* can be described as melodrama is beside the point – what is important is Holleran's acknowledgement of the ridiculousness in the dejection and sorrow at hand

serves to give the extremity of present emotion a queer pleasure and reality. He frames this understanding with Mary Todd Lincoln, whose historic role satisfies provides an outlet and analogy for *Grief's* tendency toward melodramatic camp.

Aside from the usage of humor, *Grief* operates alongside *The Beauty of Men* in many of the devices they both use to describe sodality as it changes under AIDS. The religious enlightenment invoked by sexuality and engagement with gay culture remains mutated here, where the holiness once gained appears vanished and impotent. This is never more clear than on the novel's final page; with the protagonist having left Washington DC and reached a point of utter stagnation in his mourning he resigns entirely to his grief. Shortly after the narrator and landlord agree Mary Todd Lincoln could not defeat her own misery, Holleran's implementation of the religious accents the protagonist's own failure: "The minute I entered the house, my grief returned; and I fell to my knees between my parents' bed with a deep gratitude and said a prayer: Thank you, God, for bringing me home safely. Blessed be the Lord, bless my father and mother" (*Grief* 150). Whereas the evocation of God, enlightenment, blessings and prayer gave characters in *Dancer from the Dance* a warped chance to construct identity, here it sentences the protagonist to the irrevocability of who he has become, trapped eternally in his cycle of mourning. Gay sodality and AIDS have at this point stopped evolving its members' identities, the unheard prayers now only representing the futility in moving past what has occurred.

It is not difficult to read Holleran's set of novels within a single, unbroken narrative, as if they all originate from the same point, so much so it seems characters may even move from one novel to the next. Lark and the nameless narrator of *Grief*

both watch their mother die after a prolonged battle with disability, and maintain a remarkably shared history. *Dancer from the Dance* accordingly feels the most separate; its cast is the most deliberate, distinct and very much in the midst of their own plot. Regardless, the same characters occupying New York are a part of the culture each protagonist of Holleran's later novels have abandoned. When Paul commutes between Florida and New York in *Nights in Aruba*, it seems as if he's moving between the world of *Dancer from the Dance* and a progressively darker one in his parents' home. Viewing these novels on a single plane of time shows us a transformation in thematic work that would be less visible otherwise; how significant would the New York of *Nights in Aruba* be without *Dancer from the Dance*? How painful would the death looming over *The Beauty of Men* if we had not met the men dying there, too? Or how would *Grief* work had we not seen the relationship between Lark and his mother? *The Beauty of Men* and *Grief* augment these themes to their logical conclusion, as if answering the questions left in Holleran's earlier work. The benefit of this reading is to measure precisely how the arch of gay sodality registers over time. What proves most evident from these novels in succession is that gay sodality's consequences have only been amplified by the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and its repercussions have put victims into a feedback loop of insatiable mourning and pain that manifests in a variety of horrific ways as sodality and HIV/AIDS become inseparable.

At this point, the question of how AIDS interacts with gay men as they develop identity under the trauma of gay sodality in fiction remains. The summation of these formal and stylistic parts, Holleran's many efforts to describe a distinctly gay suffering in a world with HIV/AIDS, is ultimately all to postulate a singular impression of what

happens to gay men in their relation to sodality as they face immeasurable anguish in the face of death. Holleran writes in *The Beauty of Men* that “a real person could not possibly understand... what is in my heart, the large accumulation of grief,” yet the action of the text’s very existence is to create a representation of that very accumulation (227). You’ll recall *The New York Times*’ criticism of *Grief*, suggesting that in reading it it amounts to an experience “like looking through a window at someone else’s world” (Kramer, “Times”). While this is in fact a critique of the text, it actually describes the essence of Holleran’s later writing well as he uses literary form as a transparent entity that when peered through reveals the grief, horror and trauma in what gay men experience. The mechanism of this window allows a certain tint, a recoloring and fractal reorganization of experience in new impressions, which Holleran often portrays with humor. Watney gives this act of representation an even more significant meaning in *Imagine Hope*, writing, “in what has become a highly creative, constantly changing collective memorial to our dead, we have combined public and personal grief to put an indelible face on what society at large has largely chosen to ignore – our gay and lesbian rites and rituals of mourning” (163). In this sense, describing the trauma of gay sodality as it relates to the HIV/AIDS crisis does work to memorialize and practice a communal mourning of that same trauma. So as Holleran’s work depicts the anguish of gay sodality in great detail, that same work fundamentally begins creating new facets of gay sodality in relation to HIV/AIDS.

With the notion of depicting sodality as a means of formulating it established, Kramer’s set of plays, *The Normal Heart* and *The Destiny of Me*, more clearly contribute to this specific sort of cultural construction. The first of the two, 1985’s *The*

*Normal Heart*, follows activist and author Ned Weeks as he sparks controversy in New York's advocacy front for his unapologetic, aggressive action. The play is immediately political, based on Kramer's experience in Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) which led to his resignation from the organization in 1983. It is as angry about the state of activism and the treatment of gay people's experience with AIDS as *Faggots* is about gay culture, lined with furious monologues and confrontations against city officials, gay activists and family members alike. It is also filled with a looming sense of death that never leaves the stage – from Kramer's 'About the Production' section: "Principal place was given to the latest total number of AIDS cases nationally: \_\_\_\_\_ AND COUNTING," the blank space here left empty as to be updated as more deaths were recorded during the run (Kramer, *Heart* 13). On the night of *The Normal Heart's* debut, it read 12,062. The 2011 revival favored a projection featuring names of those killed across not just the stage, but the walls of the theater as well. Audience members watched as the physical form of the theater they attended reflected the reality of death queer populations were suffering.

The experience of the stage cannot be ignored when discussing how *The Normal Heart* confronts its audience. While the fiction analyzed thus far exists strictly as fiction, to be experienced alone and outside of the physical world, Kramer's theatre was visually manifested nightly for weeks, asking audiences to communally engage in the content simply by attending. Such is the manner of contemporary theatre; to attend, to physically locate oneself in a theater and watch human beings go through staged emotion, is to accept a degree of empathy and identification with the performer in front of you. If Holleran's depiction of the despondency inspired by AIDS is a window to be



looked through, Kramer's theatrical work is a moving diorama in which the audience is directly involved.

Off the literal stage and onto the more conceptual theater that is gay living, performance proves a critical aspect of gay identity. In *Acts of Gaiety: LGBT Performance and the Politics of Pleasure*, Sara Warner writes, "Homosexuals learn to pass as straight to avoid insult, injury, and persecution, often before we are old enough to be conscious of what we are doing or why" (6). This socialization leads to an interest in performative arts, she argues, and a space wherein "gaiety," that is, cultural constructions of queer behaviors and aesthetic qualities, can be,

[enacted] so fully, that it appears 'as if' it were emanating from the core of one's being. These acts of gaiety facilitate a respite from the drudgery of daily life, provide escape from untenable situations, and enable the construction of alternative realities governed by values and aspirations obverse to (and despised by) mainstream culture... Acts of gaiety do not make the world go away; they make worlds (Warner 9)

Theatre, Warner says, is most basely existent for the sake of making an audience feel; she calls it an "engine of emotions" (7). To this point, the exercise of practicing acts of gaiety in a space wherein an audience is designed to experience emotion is to assert the experience of queer feeling in such a way that directly involves and engages an audience member. The unspoken dialogue between viewer and performer in theatre constructs a cross-cultural relay that leaves no other choice but to accept and partake in acts of gaiety much in the same vein that Holleran's literature acts a window into homosexual experience. The introduction of Jill Dolan's *Utopia in Performance*

surmises the construction of this relay perfectly: “live performance provides a place where people come together, embodied and passionate, to share experiences of meaning making and imagination that can describe or capture fleeting intimations of a better world” (13 - 14).

So as Holleran constructs queer reality in his literature, Kramer does the same when one imagines the experience of viewing *The Normal Heart* in New York City, 1985. From the stage design’s visual manifestation of mounting death to the dramatic content of the play’s many monologues decrying the state of activism, at every turn, Kramer frames the events of *The Normal Heart* within the trauma inflicted upon gay sodality. The opportunity for interpretation and direction in *The Normal Heart*’s form as drama leads to a variety of ways in which this sense of death can be aesthetically articulated as well, and across the show’s performance history set designers have featured everything from names of the dead to newspaper clippings and symptoms of AIDS as literal backdrops to the action. These motions function to install feeling in the audience observing the play as the tragedy of the text does as well, but Kramer works in the play’s dialogue to make certain these feelings are pointed toward validating a specific political thought and characterization of sodality.

*The Normal Heart* is exceptionally concerned with what Kramer characterizes as the failures of an organized gay sodality. The sodality we see here is far more compartmentalized and operational than that of *Faggots*, and the ‘pit of sexuality’ still appears throughout but now it is in the form of ideological arguments about the direction of gay sodality. “More sex isn’t liberating,” Weeks contends in one disagreement, “And having so much sex makes finding love impossible” (Kramer,

*Heart* 51). Kramer positions Ned Weeks' monogamous, sex-negative theory as a stand-in for *The Normal Heart's* philosophy and the righteous truth of the text; Weeks is challenged by his peers, friends and lovers, but the play's conclusion ensures to register his actions and rhetoric as the morally *correct* stance. In the final scene, he must watch his lover Felix die, inciting an apology from his brother, Ben, ("I'm sorry. For Felix... and for other things") that resolves the feature-length conflict between the two (Kramer, *Heart* 118). The feelings Kramer works to feature in the theatre of this scene are among his clearest incitements of a performance of suffering, operating at the utmost tragedy as Ned, grieving for his dying lover, marries him on his deathbed and actualizes the sentiment he leaves only several scenes prior: "why didn't you guys fight for the right to get married instead of the right to legitimize promiscuity?" (78). The play ends on the note that Weeks' actions have been forgiven and justified with the apology from his brother, the death of his lover and the marriage between Ned and Felix. We'll return to this scene later, but the work it does in establishing Ned as the sole voice of reason is important to note before proceeding.

The question here is how gay sodality acts in relation to the development of identity, and how Kramer depicts that work, and the answer is that *The Normal Heart* is a fierce and unyielding prescription for gay sodality. If *Faggots* is a criticism on that sodality, a description of the order of the house, *The Normal Heart* is a laundry list outlining what must be done to save that house from a terrifying and deadly exterior force in HIV/AIDS. Kramer situates Ned Weeks as the moral paragon and savior of the house, impeded by his activist peers and community, making *The Normal Heart* an ideological affront and explicit moral instruction on gay sodality.

The tone of the play is ceaselessly authoritative in its characterization of gay sodality; it is making an argument and insisting on its truth. There is a great deal of dialogue that speaks to this tone, whether it be from Weeks himself or the few allies he shares in his beliefs. Take Emma, a doctor and AIDS researcher who agrees with Weeks that the safest precaution against the virus is abstinence; in one scene, she describes to Ned what she sees of gay sodality, “I went up and down Christopher Street last night and all I saw was guys going in the bars alone and coming out with somebody. And outside the baths, all I saw guys going in... Why aren’t you telling them, bluntly, stop! Every day you don’t tell them, more people infect each other” (Kramer, *Heart* 70). Emma’s monologue serves an ultimatum in this case: if gay men do not stop sleeping with one another, they will die. The alignment between death and sex acts as the end-all-be-all for Emma and Weeks, who later adopts the policy in his interactions with GMHC. The specific phrase “all I saw” equates the entirety of Christopher Street, the entirety of a gay neighborhood to the action Emma makes out as deplorable. Erin Rand defines Kramer’s penchant for this sort of logic in “An Inflammatory Fag,” writing:

Since Kramer often presents his version of the truth as a foregone conclusion and without offering supporting evidence, his texts tend to take on a discomfitingly moralistic or self-righteous tone. Rather than moving his audience through a series of logical steps to forward his argument, Kramer describes his polemical truth as a moral -- rather than rational -- choice. The audience is therefore not so much persuaded as they are expected or morally obliged to believe. (*Heart* 304)

With this argument in mind, the manner in which Kramer treats gay sodality is one that treats an individual not on the same moral ground as Kramer and his texts as one that is wrong, one that is dangerous and one that is contributing to the spread of HIV/AIDS. Kramer vocalizes this polemic in a performance of suffering, a display of the toll AIDS takes on the individual, that is all the more poignant for its location within the pathos of the theater.

Kramer continues to utilize this tactic in his enduring equation of experience within gay sodality to Nazi aesthetics and imagery. As Fire Island becomes a concentration camp in *Faggots*, ineffective activism mirrors the holocaust in *The Normal Heart*. His writing suggests that the way homosexual men treat one another within gay sodality is equal or at least evocative of the death imposed by the holocaust, and in one early scene from the text, Weeks compares journalism on Hitler's Final Solution to the increasing apathy surrounding HIV/AIDS. In this scene, Weeks discusses with a date from the *Times*, Felix, the recent death of six of his friends: "Do you know that when Hitler's Final Solution to eliminate the Polish Jews was first mentioned in the *Times* it was on page twenty-eight. And on page six of the *Washington Post*. And the *Times* and the *Post* were owned by Jews. What causes silence like that? Why didn't the American Jews help the German Jews get out? Their very own people!" (Kramer, *Heart* 39). He goes on to elaborate that it was the in-fighting between sects of Jewish thought and activism that prevented an effective response from American Jews toward the holocaust: "it's damning to everyone who was here then: Jewish leadership for being totally ineffective; Jewish organizations for constantly fighting among themselves" (Kramer *Heart* 39). This is precisely the same reason Weeks believes

HIV/AIDS activism to be ineffective, that gay sodality cannot escape its ideological differences to reach a form of effective activism. The equation to the holocaust is something the narrative voice of *The Normal Heart* believes gay sodality is responsible for.

As the play progresses and Weeks isolates more of his fellow activists, friends and families in arguing for his moral vision of gay sodality, his polemic grows all the more feverous and intense. Ned argues with Felix, just three scenes before his death, that, “until we organize... into a united visible community that fights back, we’re doomed. That’s how I want to be defined: as one of the men who fought the war. Being defined by our cocks is literally killing us. Must we all be reduced to becoming our own murderers?” (Kramer *Heart* 110). Weeks longs to be broken away from sodality, which he describes as an institution fighting and murdering itself.

Warner notes in *Acts of Gaiety* that if it were *The Normal Heart*’s intention to mobilize effective activism on stopping HIV/AIDS, which is what Shilts believes is the case at the very least, then it has failed outright. Instead, the text is a call to arms for monogamy and ‘traditional life models’ (Warner 25). This all suggests that Kramer’s characterization of gay sodality is one to be resisted and criticized, unembraced and ignored. Holleran certainly displays the horror of gay existence (albeit, of course, with a fine stroke of comedy) in his post-epidemic novels, but the window in which he stages these tragedies is one that allows for more empathy. Kramer’s theatrical work allows for empathy and relation in the very staging of the plays as drama too, however, the emotions and feelings evoked in this context serve to establish a certain viewpoint against sexual activity. The sentiment Kramer places his audience within as he utilizes

theatrical space reads as problematic and critical polemic, but in actuality, these feelings form a platform that inspires argument and discourse in queer theory. The polemic voice and what Kramer characterizes as negative action inflicted by gay sodality within the text actually constructs gay sodality in itself. Rand argues that the practice of polemic creates a space that is characteristically queer:

It is precisely the emphasis on the potential for failure, the unpredictability of effects, and the risky nature of acting that I am claiming as the queerness of agency. Queerness appears as the general economy of undecidability from which agency emerges; as one modality of agency, then, rhetorical agency has queerness as its very condition of possibility. The polemic, as an excessive form whose volatility and tendency to be taken up in unexpected ways make the risk and undecidability of rhetorical agency especially apparent, is therefore productively queer. Kramer's polemics are not unique in their unpredictability, but given the specific ways in which they have acquired force in the disciplinary attempt to define 'queer,' they highlight the queerness that inhabits any instance of rhetorical agency. (314)

In this sense, polemic functions as camp does in its destabilization of familiar systems, and in this case, rhetoric. While Kramer's arguments read as sex-negative and self-serving in terms of politics, they express a queer discourse, in turn transforming the work into an active post-modern dialogue between audience, critics, playwright and ideology.

This queer discourse is brought to a head in *The Destiny of Me*. The theatrical overdrive of the family drama that defines the camp of aforementioned films (*Whatever*

*Happened to Baby Jane, Mildred Pierce, etc.)* bursts into a conflict that splinters Ned Weeks into two characters; one of himself at present and one of him at past, both of whom feud with their brother, father and mother over the course of the play. Although *The Destiny of Me* inevitably carries nearly as politicized a tone as the previous play or *Faggots*, placing Ned Weeks at the center of an experimental treatment after he is diagnosed with HIV, the structural decision to present time in a non-linear fashion centers the theme of the text on the personal and the individual, and describes them accordingly. My research up to this point has functioned on the foundation of a timeline, that these novels and plays speak from each other as time progresses – and so far, Holleran and Kramer’s literature have both presented linear renditions of how that time progresses. *The Destiny of Me* is the only one among them to deviates as it creates a continuum in which an older Ned Weeks can speak to himself as the younger Alexander Weeks, a name he abandons later in his life. This presentation of time is important, as it creates a fictive present wherein the impact of sodality and HIV/AIDS recontextualizes points in time that otherwise would not believed to have seen them.

Of course, there are a great deal of notable complications in the sodality established by Kramer’s theatre. Kramer’s vision of activism is largely, and by largely I mean almost exclusively, cis-normative and white. If these authors are contributing to the construction of a cultural practice, then the racial and gender makeup of these built cultures should be taken into account. As Kramer positions a near-perfect impression of himself at the center of his theatre, the culture he builds from his polemic is as a result, almost exclusively him. Holleran fares somewhat better in this respect, but his novels’



pseudo-camp description of a universal gay experience in the face of HIV/AIDS makes no account of any of the aforementioned identities.

As Holleran and Kramer create sodality, the experiences of people of color, trans people and low-income people lose their space in what is made.

With that in mind, Kramer and Holleran queer the pressure placed on their narratives by HIV/AIDS to accomplish a creation of a new sodality. As they depict the formulation of identity, the formal structure at play inherently manufacture an engagement with gay culture that is empathetic, challenging and queer. The manner they achieve this creation in is wildly different on this end as Kramer articulates his culture with a polemic that functions at face value in dangerous ways while Holleran's performance of suffering seems so genuinely hopeless it is only through a queer dialogue that its humor can show. Regardless, the act of engaging with these texts invents a new meaning for them within a queer context.

## Conclusion: To See Despair

Assessing the careers of Holleran and Kramer in juxtaposition with one another while the two depict gay sodality before, during and after the deadliest hours of the ongoing HIV/AIDS crisis displays not only a certain agency within sodality but an active construction of it as well. Just As Kramer and Holleran were reconciling with the changing formations of identity imposed by HIV/AIDS, gay authors globally were addressing their trauma as well. Alan Hollinghurst comes first to mind, an English novelist whose early eighties *The Swimming Pool Library*, a pained if not joyous rendition of gay sodality in London, finds itself rampantly opposed by his misanthropic *The Spell* and *The Line of Beauty*. While both continue to describe gay sodality, depicting its intricacies, practices and idiosyncrasies from the perspective of disenchanted young men, his later catalogue finds a similar horror in how sodality reacts to the omnipresent force of AIDS. The similar pit of sexuality featured in *Faggots* appears in *The Line of Beauty*. Mishima Yukio's movement from the interiority of *Confessions of a Mask* to a more communally concerned depiction of gay sodality in *Forbidden Colors* mirrors the development of Holleran's protagonists from his early novels to his later work.

I mention these texts to make the point that these stories have all been making: that trauma, whether it is acted out by sodality or HIV/AIDS or any other institution, changes the fashion in which authors creates art. For Holleran and Kramer, the presence of HIV/AIDS at first showcases what appears to be a shift toward the hopeless and grim, the problematic and polemic, but in actuality these authors utilize the pressure from an external force to construct a vision of sodality in their formal limits. The act of

engaging with these responses does something unique for Holleran and Kramer as it posits a new relay in which these texts exist can be communicated with. The very thematic work of these plays and novels is to rearrange sodality as both writer and audience know it.

Each of the works discussed analyzes and represents sodality somewhat differently. With *Dancer from the Dance*, Andrew Holleran utilizes camp form to redeploy religious imagery as a means of depicting the duplicitous nature of sex. Sex as a function of sodality in *Dancer...* sees a theological formation of identity that can be isolating and damaging, leaving those engaged with a decidedly dark fate they must manage to reconcile. Then, Larry Kramer in *Faggots* shows sodality as a dangerous and amoral institution through rhetoric that politicizes gay identity as something that requires specific ethical action to be salvaged from. Their ideas are different and lead to a markedly separate impression of sodality, but in comparison with one another sodality clearly exists as a force that acts upon its constituent members. When that sodality comes under their characterization in their later novels, the trauma of HIV/AIDS and the utilization of form and queer aesthetic ultimately construct their own sodality.

Viewing these novels in sequence shows precisely how impressions of sodality change under the pressure of cultural trauma, and specifically the idiosyncratic culture that can be created in experiencing them. When witnessed in this line of time, they allow us to see despair, to relate to it and, in experiencing queerness, pain, sodality and identity, to emerge in an entirely new form.

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