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"In My Church We Don't Believe in Homosexuals": Queer Identity and Dominant Culture in Three Texts of the AIDS Era

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“In My Church We Don't Believe in Homosexuals”: Queer Identity and Dominant
Culture in Three Texts of the AIDS Era

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Dedication

For David

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ABSTRACT

My thesis seeks to examine the relationship that exists between queer self-identification and heterosexual hegemonic/heteronormative power in three works of and about the AIDS era. Working from feminist and queer theory perspectives, I first chart the way in which a problematic identity—be that identity a non-identity of utter invisibility, a sick identity, a dangerous identity, or (most commonly) an identity of utter hedonism disconnected from any notions of attachment, affection, or love beyond the physical sexual act—has been and is still wholly adopted by some. I do this principally with a close reading of Renaud Camus' 1981 novel *Tricks*, as well as with substantial historical grounding. I assert that this is not just a problem in queer literature, but in queer life which queer literature deeply reflects. Through a close reading of Tony Kushner's play *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, I seek to illustrate the consequences of accepting entirely and without question a constructed and problematic identity for gay men. Historical examination also comes strongly into play through correspondence and personal narratives of men who lived through (and died in) the AIDS era, casualties of war of queer self-definition. Employing a close literary analysis of Larry Duplechan's 1986 novel *Blackbird*, my thesis seeks to chart a way to a stable,

holistic, queer identity negotiated from a position of strength. In a larger sense my thesis explicates constraints upon queer identity intended to limit queer people to a heteronomous, damaged, vulnerable social position. I raise awareness of these constraints in attempt to navigate a way around them with the ultimate destination of this navigation being a perpetually increasing humanization of a historically and institutionally dehumanized population.

Introduction

Every increment of consciousness, every step forward is a *travesía*, a crossing. I am again alien in a new territory. And again, and again. But if I escape consciousness awareness, escape 'knowing,' I won't be moving.

Knowledge makes me more aware, it makes me more conscious.

'Knowing' is painful because after 'it' happens I can't stay in the same place before and be comfortable. I am no longer the same person I was before.

(Anzaldúa 48)

There exists in the queer community a tension between two binary positions: one calls for queer people to shun their queerness and integrate with dominant heterosexual social and sexual paradigms (excluding, of course, the gender of whom we bring to bed with us)—straight drag. The other position calls for the opposite: the rejection of heterosexual paradigms by engaging in their opposite. Strict monogamy is countered by largely random and unattached sexual liaisons. Gender normativity is (often blisteringly, often delightfully) mocked. Some sort of case can be made for each binary position, but both of these positions lack the consciousness Anzaldúa calls us to, lack the element of awareness and choice. They are wholly constructed identities that are unsuited for the messy, organic nature of human selfhood.

In late 2009, a company called Near Buddy Finder released a free application for the iPhone called Grindr, which created a fair amount of stir on the gay blogosphere,

most of it positive. The application is a location-based social networking program targeted chiefly toward gay and bisexual men, though heterosexual versions for men and women are, at the time of this writing, in development. The program tracks the user's current physical location using their smartphone and, when activated, generates a list of profiles of other registered men who also use the application based on their physical proximity to the user. The list displays a user name, profile picture, the distance between various users (it does not publish specific locations as a default setting) and some of the vital statistics about the nearby men such as height, weight, and ethnicity. The application is couched in terms of a social networking tool, and surely a great number of its users use the application to find men of a shared sexual orientation to become acquainted with or network with or develop friendships with people they can more easily relate to.

Users of the service can select profiles of people they are interested in connecting with, and then open a text-based chat with them. They can share pictures, get to know one another via text chat, or even divulge their specific location for a face-to-face meeting. The service reported on its blog that it had over 400,000 users by the end of November of 2009. It would be a comfort to be able to look at the small screen of an iPhone and to know that the minority gay men are a part of is not necessarily as minor as we sometimes think it is. What seems to happen not infrequently, however, is that the application is used to arrange sexual liaisons that do not go beyond the quick and relatively unattached satisfaction of a brief, welcome sexual encounter. This is a use the vendor not inexplicitly suggests when, on its "What is Grindr?" page, it uses the subject heading "size matters" to describe its substantial user base, or the heading "no strings attached"—a phrase

commonly deployed on personals sites to suggest that the author of a given profile is not interested in anything beyond a purely sexual encounter—to describe the ways in which the product is convenient and customizable. Ultimately, there is ambivalence from the the developers in how the product is used. The tag line for the product, after all, is “Whether he’s Mr. Right or Mr. Tonight, your man is hanging out on Grindr, a killer location-based social networking tool for the iPhone or iPod Touch.”

The urge turn on, log in, and get off using Grindr is a digital take on an old story in the gay community. Make no mistake about it: the creation of platforms for social interaction between gay men that allow us to openly come to know one another, in any sense, is to be lauded, whether that platform takes the form of a smartphone application or a gay rights organization meeting or a gay bar. Homosexual males are, at least statistically, fairly rare. As John D’Emillo reminds us, Alfred Kinsey’s study, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, published in the middle of the twentieth century when homophobia was for most Americans the norm, suggested that four percent of men practiced homosexuality exclusively and roughly twelve percent were inclined toward their own gender for a period of at least three years (*Sexual Politics* 35). Kinsey’s numbers have not gone unquestioned and his methodology was not without its problems, but it remains true to say that gay men are far from the majority. Lacking inherent external identifiers of their sexual identity, especially in periods of history or in places where homosexual inclinations or behavior commonly associated with homosexuality were (and remain) rewarded with violence or ostracization, gay men need a way to find one another. When these meetings occur, however, and when sex immediately follows, it

reinforces an image of gay identity that has not served gay people well—that has, in fact, been fatal for a great number of us—that was foisted upon us by the homophobia of our own dominant culture. Further, such behavior reinforces notions of homophobia and what homosexuality is that bolster the justifications for our standing as one of a few minorities remaining in the United States who lack some of even the most basic legal protections needed to thrive in a contemporary society. Drawing from works of history, sociology, philosophy, and literature of the AIDS era, I intend to explore and document the identity that was created for gay men when they could no longer simply be ignored, and how we by and large embraced that identity to our own detriment. From there I hope to show, drawing mainly from philosophy and literature, a way out of this imposed identity construction.

Gloria Anzaldúa reminds us that the way in which humans perceive the world and, as such, the way we interact with it, is determined directly, and I think she would say entirely, by the culture in which people are participants:

Culture forms our beliefs. We perceive the version of reality that it communicates. Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted to us through the culture. Culture is made by those in power—men. Males make the rules and laws; women transmit them. How many times have I heard mothers and mothers-in-law tell their sons to beat their wives for not obeying them, for being *hociconas* (big mouths), for being *callajeras* (going to visit and gossip with neighbors), for expecting their husbands to help with the

rearing of children and housework, for wanting to be something other than housewives? (16)

In much the same way as the “laws” of the men who dictate how women should behave are transmitted to women who then become their enforcers of those laws upon women who would dare to transgress masculine authority, so too are such laws transmitted to the marginal figures at the center of this work: gay men.

As John D'Emilo asserts in *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States*, there have been, since the formation of a substantive queer rights movement in America, conflicting impulses on whether or not the way to achieving equality was through conformity or through radicalization. In the mid-fifties the Daughters of Bilitis and the Mattachine Society, the public faces of the gay rights movement, called for lesbians and gays to adhere to the standards of normative society. By contrast, ONE Inc., a gay rights publication loosely associated at the time with the Mattachine Society, was only interested in communicating to a gay audience, and “deliberately sought to provoke its audience. It placed itself in opposition to the culturally dominant view of same-sex eroticism and rejected the notion that anyone other than gay men and women possessed the authority to make judgments about homosexuality” (108-9). This conflict between conformity and radicalization exists due in no small part to the unfortunate (or fortunate, depending on one's political location) situation where no immediately obvious external identifiers of one's sexual identity exist for most lesbians and gay men. Gay men and lesbians are deciding every moment of every day and with every interaction, both to the world outside the self and to the self,

whether to conform to the whims of a society which by and large actively hates them and try to ensure some immediate safety, or whether or to be boldly radical; to represent themselves as they are. In this work I will argue, following the sentiments of Larry Kramer, to some extent against the historical and literary promiscuity that has long been associated with gay men.

Kramer has endured, with relative grace, blistering criticism since the earliest days of his activism when he helped to begin Gay Men's Health Crisis, one of the first AIDS outreach centers in New York City. He has been dismissed as an integrationist prude, an extension of the powers that seek to control gay men's lives and force them into rigidly defined identities that align neatly with typical gender and sex roles of heterosexual people. While I would argue that such an interpretation is a critically flawed misreading of the work of Kramer's life, the misunderstanding is to some extent understandable. Much of this criticism occurs due to a conflation of his ideas with the excessively blunt instrument that is his rhetorical approach. Consider his statement, referring to the contemporary state of gay politics in America, that:

We of course continue to be in our usual state of total denial and disarray. Whatever structure the gay world had, if we ever had one, is gone. Our organizations stink. Almost every one of them. Despite the best will in the world, most of them are worthless to us.... We have no power. Nobody listens to us. We have no access to power. The cabal disdains us totally. We are completely disposable. It is a horror show. There is not one single person in Washington who will get us or give us anything but shit and

more shit. I'm sorry. This is where we are now. Nowhere. And you expect me to cry for you if you get hooked on meth or can't stop the circuit parties or the orgies. Okay, I feel sorry for you. Does that change anything? (48)

His bombastic approach works at cross-purposes to his ultimate, admirable goal: improving, even saving, the lives of gay men whose identities are, even today as they were when Kramer was a young man, subject to the destructive ideas forced upon them by hegemonic heterosexual culture.

As to my own part, I abjure any charges of prudishness. As of this writing I have been partnered monogamously for five years and have enjoyed the stability and protection of that monogamy immensely. My commitment to my partner does however come with an escape clause—namely, either of us have free reign to roam if we ask the other first and retain the primacy of our own emotional, romantic, and sexual relations. Neither of us have used this escape clause (I do not intend to, nor, I am fairly sure, does my partner) but it is a reassurance to know it is there. Observe any particular embattled politician or sports figure or religious leader du jour: monogamy simply does not work for everyone, and trying to insist that it does leads almost without fail to relationships for many that are in every way unsatisfying: emotionally, romantically, spiritually, sexually. I am not writing against freedom of sexual expression; freedom of sexual expression is what allows me to write this work. I am not writing from the perspective of someone who places any stock whatsoever in the largely manufactured notion that for each person there exists one perfect love who will satisfy all needs, emotional, spiritual, sexual; such a sentiment ignores the social circumstances of human evolution and overwhelming

evidence to the contrary. I am not writing out of any notions of physical or spiritual purity. Again I echo Larry Kramer when he asks his queer audience “not to fuck indiscriminately, to use condoms, to cool it, to make the distinction between sexual freedom (which of course I favor) and promiscuity (which is killing us). I still live in a population of people who are unable to confront the realities of the acts our bodies perform, even when these acts are true killing fields” (17). What I am calling for is consciousness.

Chapter One: Sex Deviates and Inverts: Queer Identity before the Second World War

John D'Emillo, in *Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University*, notes that in the earliest part of the country's history, going as far back as the colonial period in New England, there was no notion of a homosexual identity, despite the evidence of homosexual behavior occurring (revealed mostly through court records of trials and punishment for homosexual behavior among women and men, as well as exhortations against the practice from church sermons). He writes:

There was, quite simply, no “social space” in the colonial system of production that allowed men and women to be gay. Survival was structured around participation in a nuclear family. There were certain homosexual acts—sodomy among men, “lewdness” among women—in which individuals engaged, but family was so pervasive that colonial society lacked even the category of homosexual or lesbian to describe a person. (7-8).

The Puritan culture itself, as a necessary function of being a very small, very vulnerable group of people that needed to grow its numbers to literally survive from one year to the next “did not celebrate heterosexuality but rather marriage; they condemned all sexual expression outside the marriage bond and did not differentiate sharply between sodomy and heterosexual fornication.” (D'Emilo, *Making Trouble* 7) Despite the clear existence of homosexual behavior, there was no notion of a homosexual identity. No such identity

could exist as a result of the material needs of the dominant culture that existed at the time; homosexual acts were merely instances of individual misbehavior, even when they happened continually. Dominant culture dictated and dictates what possibilities existed and exist for women and men, no matter what their sexual practices, politics, or identities were or are.

While a queer subculture existed in a limited fashion before end of the First World War that actively transgressed the boundaries of gender, race, class, and sexuality, it was quite limited in what those who participated in it could actually do. Though only a single example that cannot by necessity stand in for the whole, Loughery indicates the existence of a club that existed in 1907 in St. Louis. Investigators who discovered the club were:

shocked by the spectacle of a number of black men, many of them cooks, butlers, and chauffeurs from the better homes, carousing in drag with white men at a local dance hall, a discovery at least as unsettling for its violation of racial taboos as for what it suggested about erotic deviance in Missouri. (The names of the “negro perverts” were published in the newspaper, according to an area doctor, but the “names of the white degenerates consorting with them were not given.”) (5)

While men dancing together, and especially men of different races dancing together, was both a progressive and transgressive action, it was, in its own way, limited by the dogmatic principles of the dominant culture of its day. The white men maintained their masculine attire and thus their masculine identity. The black men, already forced into a compromised position in the social hierarchy as a result of their racial background, were

forced to adopt feminine dress and a more feminized role. They also assumed most of the risk of their transgressive action with white men, and suffered a punishment different from and disproportionately worse than that of their white partners.

It is ultimately unsurprising, given the understanding contemporary to the time of the incident mentioned previously, that gender roles were fiercely maintained by homosexuals even as they transgressed them with homosexual practice. Even the most progressive theories on why homosexuality existed at the time, specifically the work of Havelock Ellis, “linked proper sexual development to notions of femininity and masculinity. As a result, homosexuality became associated with 'mannishness' in women and effeminacy in men as descriptions of both physical appearance and personality.” (D'Emilo, *Sexual Politics* 17). The dominant intellectual and cultural models that existed at the beginning of the twentieth century suggested that, though homosexuality was not a choice (and was an inborn and immutable trait), it was still something of an error. In gay men the essence or spirit of a woman was thought to have been mistakenly transcribed into a male body. In lesbians the stuff of men was mistakenly housed in the body of a woman. The ethos of the prewar period is best represented in literature by Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*. Hall's female protagonist, Stephen Gordon, even named as a male, behaves and thinks in every way as though she were a man. She possesses a wild temper, is protective of her romantic interests as might be a husband to a wife. She gets into fistfights with boys as a young girl and rides her horse astride.

Lougherty suggests that toward the latter part of the 1920's and early part of the 1930's, there grew in urban areas a certain market for queers who performed effeminately

or in drag on the stage, though it was in a way a sort of freak show even as these performances voiced publicly the existence and verve of homosexual men living under the thumb of heteronormative cultural mores (41-4). The notion of a feminine lesbian or a masculine gay male was ultimately foreign and conceptually difficult for most in the period before the Second World War, and both fictional literature and journalistic accounts of the time suggest that women and men inclined toward their own gender both emotionally and sexually did not deviate from the gender roles assigned to them, even as they crossed the borders of sexual practice to express their affection for their own gender.

Representations of gay men in literature in the period before the advent of the Second World War were similarly regrettable and divisive. Though there was a sharp increase in the publication of material that featured queer men, it “perhaps mercifully... attracted a small heterosexual audience” (Lougherty 83); the works only reinforced the idea gay men insatiable, dangerous perverts. Lougherty writes that the fictive representations of gay men, reflective of the dominant cultural norms to which they were subject:

reflected the crassness of the fashionable interest in deviance and the hatred of homosexuals felt by society at large... the brotherhood (or sisterhood, to be precise) isn't only something to “come out” into—a person becomes *immersed* in it, educated by its codes, changed forever by its nerve and irreverence. Sex is plentiful and hedonistic. Parties are wild. In the early-1930s gay novels also have something to say about the degree to which gay men saw themselves as molders of their own destiny, given

certain limits in a stigmatizing culture, and in that regard, there was a difference worth noting between the fictional perspective of interested heterosexuals and the view of those who were “in the life.” (83)

Lougherty supports this notion with examples from two novels from the period. *Strange Brother*, written by journalist Blair Niles, features a protagonist who “is dismayed by the campiness of most homosexuals he knows, overwhelmed by the prejudice of society, and in the end blows his brains out when forced to deal with a neighborhood blackmailer” (83). *Twilight Men*, by Andre Tellier, shows two gay men whose lives end in suicide after a “downward spiral of drink, drugs, meaningless attachments, patricide, and ultimately his [the protagonist's] death death in an Eleventh Avenue flophouse.” (Lougherty 83)

Other slightly more positive and realistic examples exist, but the “downward spiral” into self-abuse and self-destruction, often through suicide, is an indelible component of the novels of the time. The message resounded through queer literature (literature of queers, both by queers and not by queers) of the period that there was no way in which to be healthy and homosexual, no way to assert the validity of and experience their sexuality without an excruciating descent into some unfortunate amalgam of madness, murder, abuse, or death.

When men of the period did manage to buck the demands of the dominant culture and practice the sexuality to which they were naturally inclined, they still did so in a way that was prescribed by the very society they were trying to act against; no alternate or individualistic expressions of sexuality could exist. Gay men could only be fairies, and there was only one sort of fairy. As Lougherty words it:

There was a place in the scheme of things for the suicidal homosexual... and for the family misfit—Uncle Harry looks at his nephew too longingly in the 1932 novel *This Man is my Brother* and is obligated to die in a swimming accident; Edward Everett Horton plays with dolls in the movie *The Gay Divorcee* and does his best to avoid the marriage trap for as long as possible... A third image, though, just as acceptable to society at large and just as problematic for gay men themselves, was a residue from the era of the Wilde trials, the myth of the affluent gay man with designs on innocent and less affluent youth. (That there have always been rich homosexual men who paid working-class or middle-class men or teenagers to have sex with them goes without saying; the extent to which this represents a corruption of unwilling heterosexuals is the more complicated question.) The ghoulish Mr. Lowell who transports Ken Gracey, future “Butterfly Man,” from Texas poverty to the lap of luxury in his California mansion is pure predator and dies a brutal death years later, strangled with a woman's stocking. (85-6)

What ultimately set into motion the possibility of gay men stepping outside the role of the weak, servile, and marginal figure that heteronormative American society prescribed for them was the entry of the United States into the Second World War, and the conscription of males living in the United States that accompanied it. As Lougherty suggests, there was among most males living in the United States a strong drive to enlist, an “appealing moral imperative, given the brutal nature of the enemy” (136). There are few events that

adhere more closely to the conventions of normative masculinity than rushing off to participate in war. American participation in the Second World War afforded American queer people the opportunity to challenge the conventions associated with their sexuality. War, as much as it is a force of dehumanization, caused queer people to, in a very strange twist, see themselves as much more wholly human than they had previously.

Chapter 2: World War II

Beyond the urge to assert one's masculinity against a vicious enemy, however, was an opportunity for gay men that did not exist before: the sudden need for male bodies to fight in the war made it possible for gay men, if they were willing to lie about their status as gay men, to “be like all the other guys” (Lougherty 136)—to assert, through enlistment and military action, that there were other sorts of queer people apart from the effeminate, the fairy, the swish. Gay men, by enlisting, could “flout the stereotype of weakness and effeminacy.” (Lougherty 136) New recruits were asked questions about their sexuality in an attempt to disqualify gay men from service in the military, but the demand for men to fight was so great (and the training of military screeners so lackluster—generally a three month crash course in psychology that left them with no ability to with any measure of accuracy detect someone whose sexual proclivities deviated from the bulk of his male peers) that “draft boards were willing to turn a blind eye to almost anyone who was willing to put up the right front for the three minutes or less that the standard interview took” (Lougherty 137).

If the chance to prove, either to themselves or to other men, that there were other ways to exist as someone with a primary sexuality that steers them toward their own gender, was the carrot for enlisting with the military, there was also something of a stick: men who would not hide their homosexuality, or who could not due to their affect coming in line too closely with stereotypical norms of gay men, were generally rejected by draft

boards with a 4-F deferment, a deferment generally assigned to those who were not fit for service. If a man who was in every way physically healthy and not mentally unstable or mentally challenged enough to serve received such a deferment, explaining the reason for it could be a difficult challenge when trying to explain it to family or when applying for work (Lougherty 136).

Nevertheless, for queer men who were able to successfully lie their way into the armed services, the forced closed proximity of great number of men (and often exclusively men) opened doors for gay men who, in the period before the Second World War, were not as urbanized as they are today, to meet, become friends, and experience romantic and intimate attachments that created an awareness among gay men of homosexuality “having a social and emotional as well as sexual dimension” (Lougherty 140). The experiences of gay men (and also lesbian women who served in the war effort, often as ambulance drivers) became aware of one another, grew “heartened by a new sense of how large and varied their numbers were. Careful as they had to be not to expose themselves to the wrong people, the right people always found a way of recognizing one another” (Lougherty 141) Exclusively heterosexual and predominantly heterosexual men not infrequently benefited from the company of homosexual men in an environment in which relationships with women, both intimate and casual, were few and far between. Lougherty writes that though there were situations that were clearly examples of “situational homosexuality”, often the romantic and sexual relationships between men in the period of the Second World War went beyond base sexual gratification:

They often intuited something more profound, about the human capacity

for emotional and erotic expression that transcended customary boundaries or definitions. In effect, if men who loved women and lived by society's codes could thrill to the touch of other men, whatever the circumstances, such desires couldn't be all that strange, repellent, or immoral. (141)

Most important about the period of the Second World War, however, was that it forcibly renounced, generally under attack by heavy artillery or machine gun, all of the declarations made by heteronormative society that men who were oriented toward their own gender were weaker, more fragile, less able, less substantively male and masculine as a result of their romantic and sexual urge toward their own gender. Gay men, who had been told all their lives that men like them were inadequate and pathetic, found themselves surviving and sometimes even thriving alongside their heterosexual comrades. Lougherty phrases the sentiment beautifully when he writes:

There was also the matter of capability, toughness, and commitment. Whether the label of “sissy” had been applied to them or not, many gay men had grown up troubled by the thought that their different sexual desires necessarily implied other, more consequential differences from their peers. Were they, at heart, as “manly” as their straight comrades? Could they be as rugged, tenacious, and stoical? Four years of war, from the challenges of boot camp to the trial by fire of combat, answered those questions. Not only did gay servicemen acquit themselves honorably in the jungles of Guadalcanal and on the beaches of Normandy, but they bore as heroically as anyone else the psychological toll that constant

uncertainty, loss of individuality, and the omnipresence of death necessarily entail. At times they were forced to endure a kind of pain never asked or expected of heterosexual servicemen. The grief a straight man could openly express... was seldom a possibility for the gay man who felt lonely or who had just learned that his lover was a casualty of war. Far from seeing themselves as easily traumatized or unable to carry their own weight, the generation of gay men who served in World War II had an experience denied to the next generation. They *knew* that their capacity to survive and function—and, for some, to excel—was in no way impaired by their sexual life. On the contrary, their position in a society that disapproved of their desires and tormented or ostracized them had on occasion prepared them for the struggle and the sacrifice. (143)

While the period of World War Two was one of openness and community among homosexual males, and a time in which the rigid descriptors of gay men existing only as sissies, nancies, other less-than-human over simplified renderings of one small if substantial part of the spectrum of human sexual expression, the period that followed allowed for relatively little deviance from the norm.

Chapter Three: Marginal Mid-Century

The earliest part of the Cold War, marked as it was by scares both red and pink, showed a significant narrowing of the possibilities that existed for gay men in the period of the Second World War. Most noticeable was a desire for sexual deviance of all sorts—heterosexual deviance as well as homosexual deviance—to be categorized similarly and then restrained. There was serious concerns by recent, almost entirely white émigrés to the paradise of American postwar suburbia that their children would be plucked out of their tree-lined cul-de-sacs and abused. While the majority of attention to this largely illusory specter of abuse was directed at men who molested girls, men who sexually abused female children were put into the same category that often described homosexuals. As Lougherty writes, “the terms sexual psychopath, sex criminal, deviant, and homosexual came to be used almost interchangeably” (168). The dominant cultural perception saw no clear articulation between categories of sexual predator, homosexual, or any sort of sexual deviancy. The urge to stay in the closet, even to marry a partner one had no (or minimal—sexuality is a continuum, after all) physical interest in was strengthened by the perception of all gay men and lesbian women as equivalent to and undifferentiated from people whose sexual practices were profoundly destructive to society in a way homosexual love was and is not.

In the postwar period the predominant meeting place for men who desired sex with men—sometimes just sex, sometimes an attachment beyond the physical—was the

public restroom, known rather more colloquially as a “tearoom.” It was at the tearoom that men who desired homosexual sex but were not at all interested in living life as openly homosexual people—and it was very much the pragmatic thing to do at the time—could have at least their physical needs met. Such men were often married and commonly had children of their own, suggesting the cultural imperative to conform to heteronormative standards (Lougherty 173). The tearoom scene was ultimately, in Lougherty's words, “unfortunate if a man viewed his experiences as a degradation appropriate to his station in life as a 'deviant' (a great danger for those who became addicted to the setting, effectively divorcing sex and emotion)” (175). The chance and detached encounters between random men coupling for purely physical release—there were examples of men who actually coupled or grew to be close friends with their tricks, but they seem to be fairly few and far between—not infrequently “could lend itself to epic proportions of self-hate and depression... the grubbiness and the element of danger inherent in the settings were aphrodisiacs for some men; for others, it was more a matter of compulsion than pleasure.” (Lougherty 176-7).

That the sexual lives of men who desired partners of the same gender began in, or in many sad cases were restricted entirely to the public toilet, unsanitary, dingy, smelly, as they were, built only for the purpose of purging bodily waste, was a monstrous example of the monstrous sexuality set forth for gay men to follow. That tearoom culture existed (even though it was largely forced upon gay men by hegemonic heterosexual power, since places where gay men would congregate more publicly and in less mechanistic ways were often raided by police morals squads) and was known enlarged the specter of

gay male sexuality to a level abhorrent to both mainstream heterosexual society and as well as to some of the gay men practicing tearoom culture:

Men hanging out in public bathrooms, either to lure innocent boys to their doom (in sex crimes panic fantasy) or (in reality) to suck each other off—what could be more revolting? It was a perfect image for those who wanted to proselytize about the inherent baseness of male homosexuality, and it was a stereotype that made many gay men uncomfortable and angry. (Lougherty 174-5)

The practice was on the whole a perfect closed system of oppression. Gay men, loathed and feared by entrenched heteronorminal power, were forced to the fetid social margins to congregate and commingle. The dominant culture then exposed the literal and figurative filth in which they congregated as justification for their continued forced migration to the periphery of society and their outright pathologization, ignoring the role homophobic influence played in forcing gay men to congregate in the dingy outside fringes of mainstream society. The situation was a trap, impossible to escape from, impossible to progress out of. Marginalization to tearoom culture was an early example of what would follow in the pre-AIDS eras of the sixties and seventies, where gay men were forced, again by dominant hegemonic social and legal pressure, into inherently unstable and untenable social positions that made it vastly more difficult for men to establish families on their own terms, and to benefit from a more conscious, more considered, longer-term sexuality.

Chapter Four: The Sixties and Seventies: Revolutions of a Sort

“You know, the guys there were so beautiful. They've lost that wounded look that fags all had ten years ago.” (Ginsburg, qtd. in D'Emilo, *Sexual Politics* 232)

While the middle of the twentieth century was for many gay men and lesbians a very dark time of repression, silence, and limited, shameful interactions with people of their own sexual inclinations, the revolutionary climate of the sixties tore down at least some of the cultural barriers that prevented heterosexual normativity from defining with strict precision the potential ways in which homosexual people could exist. I am practicing some overgeneralization here; some areas were more or less restrictive than others. One of the co-founders of one a mid-sixties and early seventies group that was quite successful in its mission in to share and exhibit gay male cultural material is noted in Lougherty's writing as calling the era and locale (Pensacola, Florida) a “era of *extreme* closet cases, young men living with their families, nervous, secretive men—a place of *no* outward freedom at all.” (274) Though the history of the earlier gay rights organizations —The Mattachine Society, the Daughters of Bilitis, various homophile leagues of the forties and fifties—is quite fascinating and should not be ignored, their contributions were not easily recognized by hegemonic heterosexual forces until the 1960's. It also brought about a much more clearly defined and stronger queer rights movement and structural changes to the law enforcement system—both its public and codified side and

its darker, seedier side—that made it possible for queer people to congregate more openly without as great a threat of violence, shame, or legal reprisal. The 1960's were the period in which gay men and lesbians began to practice, though not without internal conflict, their own self-definition rather than accepting the definition of what a gay man or lesbian woman could be from a culture intent on keeping them a quiet, controlled, powerless minority. Cracks began to form in the wall that confined queer people to one particular, rigid identity.

This transition from accepting a straight-authored definition of queer sexuality to authoring it themselves was by no means smooth or instantaneous. Pulp novels of the period began to transgress the rigid definitions of gay sexuality, but rarely without looking back at the safer identities from which they had come. In *Born to be Gay*, for example, a gang of older, masculine teenagers rape a younger gay male teenager when they are unable to find a woman who is willing to attend to their sexual desires. Such writing is essentially undifferentiated from the paradigm that came before it—the butch, masculine “trade” male seeking physical pleasure from the degraded and lesser queer. Where the text does diverge, however, is when its protagonist—the molested gay male mentioned previously—states that he wants a boyfriend who is gay like himself, with whom he can enjoy a romantic partnership, with whom he can share a sexual relationship based on intimacy and affection instead of instant gratification through degradation. He is seeking a queer identity of his own (Lougherty 282).

This is the era in which gays asserted their right to spiritual practice, even the same practice that deemed their existence abominable. Troy Perry organized the

Metropolitan Community Church in the latter part of the 1960's informally when he took out an advertisement in *The Advocate* that called for a gathering of gay Christians to meet and pray together. The initial meeting was quite small. Twelve people came, nine of whom Perry already knew. It grew quickly following an interview with Perry in *The Advocate*, and by the end of the 1960's had a meeting place of its own and a thousand regular worshippers. Perry created the sense that everyone was welcome at his church, queer or otherwise, and created an environment that both acknowledged the distinctiveness of gay people and yet also stressed their validity of their human existence (Lougherty 287-9).

This is the era in which gay men and women started to act peacefully against the legal system and its enforcement mechanisms that targeted them with almost singular vitriol. In any era it was not uncommon for plainclothes police officers to circulate secretly among the crowds at gay bars (though they were, quite frankly, often easy to identify as such) and then reveal themselves to make random arrests. At one particular gay bar in Long Beach known as The Patch just such an event occurred. Troy Perry, the founder-to-be of the Metropolitan Community Church, was arrested with a dance partner on charges of lewd and lascivious behavior. In previous eras the patrons would have quietly shuffled away, grateful that it was someone other than themselves who had gotten grabbed by the police. The revolutionary climate of the period, however, emboldened gay men as well. Instead of closing the bar for the night, the bar's manager Lee Glaze made an off-the-cuff speech to his patrons and led them, armed with bouquets of flowers, to the police station to wait in an act of peaceful rebellion and group unity for the release of

their peers (Lougherty 303-4).

This is also the era in which the response to the structural oppression of queer people took a more radical and forcible turn, fueled in a large part by the creation of a collective queer identity that existed apart from the status of queer people as isolated and pathologized people that existed before the radical social pinwheeling of the 1960's and 1970's. The Stonewall Inn was an unusual place for one of the most pivotal moments in queer history to take place. It was almost a relic of the tearoom era. Undoubtedly it was a dive bar in the worst possible sense of the term. D'Emilo notes that it sold liquor to a primarily non-white clientele (an important reminder that people of color played an important and often overlooked role in gay liberation, given that most queer faces we see today in politics and entertainment are white) without the benefit of a liquor license and hired go-go boys who wore relatively little clothing as entertainment (*Sexual Politics* 233). Lougherty reminds us that it lacked adequate running water, that the go-go boys who worked there perched inside a cage on the bartop, and that was allowed to operate at all solely because the Stonewall's mafia owners paid bribes in the amount of \$2,000 a week to the New York Police Department's Sixth Precinct (315). The specifics of what went on at the Stonewall in the early morning hours of June 28, 1969 are very much in dispute and are ultimately beyond the scope of this work. The police came and started to check the patrons' IDs. Some patrons got arrested and were thrown into paddy wagons. Quite suddenly the crowd, a crowd that would have tried to quietly shuffle away in previous eras, responded collectively and violently with a hail of thrown objects. Police were forced to hide inside the Stonewall itself; queer men, some of the fiercest of whom

were in full drag, ripped a parking meter out of the street and started to break down the Stonewall's front door. The crowd dissipated during the day, but revived each night for two more nights for still further spats of violence and conflict between queer people and police (Lougherty 317-8). D'Emilo estimates that as many as 2,000 homosexuals and allies participated in the riot, vastly outnumbering the 400 policemen assigned to quell it. When police managed to gain an advantage and start to assault isolated rioters “several dozen queens screaming 'Save our Sister!' rushed a group of officers who were clubbing a young man and dragged him to safety” (D'Emilo, *Sexual Politics* 232). Rallying cries of “Gay Power!” filled the streets. Graffiti appeared with the same slogan (D'Emilo, *Sexual Politics* 232). Collective queer identity, defined oppositionally against the dominant heterosexual norms of the time, began to challenge and disrupt established relational paradigms between people of different sexual inclinations—in this case, violently.

These changes stood in as representative of a larger shift in gay identity that took place in the 1960's and 1970's. Collective identity was evolving where before homosexuals, no doubt in part *because* the dominant cultural image of the homosexual male applied emphasis to a vagrant and isolated nature, were impelled both legally and culturally to keep separate from one another. Notes D'Emilo:

A common thread ran through much of the literature on homosexuality and lesbianism. From lesbian pulp novels set in a metropolitan milieu of bars and private parties to a photo essay in *Life* that depicted male homosexual meeting places came the implicit recognition that gay men and women existed in groups with a network of institutions and resources to sustain

their social identity. The shift suggests an alteration not merely in attitudes—a willingness to acknowledge the presence of a gay subculture in American cities—but also a change in social reality, the rapid maturation in postwar America of a stable gay world that could no longer escape detection. (*Sexual Politics* 139)

Chapter Five: On *Tricks*

As something of a continental take on John Rechy's well studied *City of Night*, Renaud Camus' 1981 *Tricks* catalogues, in a distant, detached style that seems connotative of the image of two anonymous men copulating hastily in a mid-century public bathroom, sexual liaisons between the principal character, also Renaud Camus (I address the writer of the book as Camus and the main character in the text as Renaud), and twenty five men. The book spans chronologically five months between March and August of 1978, and geographically between France, New York, Washington D.C., and San Francisco. *Tricks* is a relic the pre-AIDS era, an era I have heard anecdotally called the golden age of gay sex—sex exclusively, but not love. While there are moments of humanity and warmth in the text, moments of genuine affection, the primary purposes of the queer men who interact in the text are to achieve sexual self-satisfaction. In so doing they participate fully in the expected, marginalized role of gay men. Roland Barthes, in the introduction to *Tricks*, writes that “Renaud Camus' narratives are neutral, they do not participate in the game of interpretation. They are surfaces without shadows, *without ulterior motives*” (viii). I would agree with Barthes, but not uncritically: as much as *Tricks* does not directly put forward its own ulterior motives, preferring instead to state simply that two men can copulate healthfully and be functional people, it is also not aware of nor does it counter the ulterior motives of the dominant culture that seeks to confine queer people to social marginality and vulnerability. Rarely does *Tricks* go into

detail beyond mechanistic narration of the sex act. In so doing, it quietly reaffirms the notion, by failing to contrast it, that there is little to gay men deserving of social protection, normalization, worth; instead, all there is deviant sexual practice.

Barthes argues in his introduction to *Tricks* that the the essence of the trick—the essential humanity of the person with whom Renaud is having sex—is exposed slowly through the process of cruising: “Renaud Camus' *Tricks* always begin with an encounter with the longed-for type (perfectly encoded; the type could figure in a catalog or in a page of personal want-ads); but once language appears, the type is transformed into a person, and the relation becomes inimitable, whatever the banality of the first remarks” (ix). Yet he also argues against this point when he writes that “the *Tricks* repeat themselves; the subject is on a treadmill” (ix) and indeed he is; each “encounter” reads very much similarly. The character seeks out a male figure who meets his ideal physical type (strong, masculine, generally with facial hair and dense body hair) and pursues an encounter with the trick in ways that closely mirror the tricks that preceded him (Renaud kissing the hollow of his trick's neck, the licking of the trick's chest, the regular switching of sexual roles between insertive and receptive partner). The differences are, in actuality, quite small between each trick with only a few notable exceptions. The humanity that each trick reveals is a highly subjugated humanity, dependent as it is on the perception—generally rooted in the libidinal—of the principal character whose interest rarely transcends the sexual and momentary. Ultimately none of the tricks seem to satisfy; why else would Renaud, after all, repeatedly go after the same types of men in the same types of ways?

Renaud has moments of enormous apprehension when he comes close to establishing something of a connection with his tricks. In these moments their conversation and personal (rather than physical) communion is abruptly truncated and turned toward physical exchange, Renaud's release valve for all pressures. The first trick cataloged, Walthère Dumas, begins to talk with Renaud after they both leave Renaud's preferred Parisian club, the *Manhattan*. They talk first, but when some sort of connection seems to be building, Renaud's trick performs a conversational about-face and makes a sexual proposition, which Renaud enthusiastically accepts:

But I went on toward the stranger. This time his eyes didn't avoid mine, he even smiled. So I went up to him:

“Funny, leaving that way.”

“What way?”

“Leaving the *Manhattan*. Before, people used to stand in the street for a while, in front of the door; now they scatter all around. No one really leaves. They come back, everyone makes a few last attempts, people stare at each other—I think it's funny . . . you look like you're falling asleep on your feet.”

“I haven't slept much in the last two weeks.”

“Living it up?”

“No. It was too hot.”

“The tropics?”

“Yeah.”

“Where in the tropics?”

“Equatorial Africa.”

“Where in Equatorial Africa?”

“Nigeria.”

“Where in Nigeria?”

“Lagos.”

“I see.”

“What are you doing?”

“When?”

“Now.”

“I don't know.”

“It all depends?”

I laugh.

“Exactly.”

“You want to come home with me?”

“Sure.”

He laughs. (3)

The sexual encounter between Renaud and Walthère is physically and emotionally satisfying for the moments it exists, but there is also the suggestion in the encounter's epilogue that the encounter is somehow lacking. Renaud wants something more from Walthère, but Walthère is incapable of giving it to him:

[Seen him several times, but for five minutes, and always by accident. I

interest him, he says, but not for reasons which make him interesting to me. He'd like to have discussions with me. He gave me his telephone number. One night, when I called him, he was obviously making love. He declined the offer of my telephone number ("I know I won't use it, that's how I am"), but urged me to telephone him again, which I won't do.] (12; italics Camus')

The something Walthère cannot give goes unstated and is yet clear to the reader, removed as she or he is from Renaud's experience. Walthère wants to have *discussions* with Renaud, wants to establish an interaction based on intellectual and personal as well as physical harmony. Renaud telephoning Walthère is indicative of a similar desire; he can (and does, after all) have many other sexual encounters, many far more sexually and personally satisfying. There was nothing particularly special about Walthère that made him more or less desirable than the other men Renaud sleeps with. He calls him because he wants to try to find more from their encounter, because he found it lacking. Yet he is stymied, as is Walthère, by the hypersexual identity constructed for them both as gay men by the dominant culture to which they belong. Renaud has a clear disdain for the *discussions* Walthère wants to have with him. He thinks he wants to have sex with him and do little else besides. Walthère would like more from Renaud, but is driven by the cultural impetus to copulate as rabidly as possible. If he were able to, as Kramer suggests, "cool it" (33), perhaps both would have been able to find more satisfaction from their relationship, and to better protect themselves from the HIV epidemic that would soon follow their commingling.

This is not to say that there are no moments where the humanity of the characters is revealed to the readers. Such a failing would transform the work from a literary text to a purely pornographic text. Camus neatly encapsulates some of the awkwardness that exists of the situation Renaud finds himself in, some of the necessary ungainliness of expressing a desire to take a man home to bed him and do little else besides. Renaud cruises a man he knows only as the brother of an acquaintance of his, Jacques. He is referred to in the chapter simply as Jacques' brother. To veer into a tangent for a moment, Renaud later also forgets the name of another trick, one with whom he romps in a public restroom in Italy (Camus 61). He does eventually recover the name (the name is Calogero, with whom he otherwise gets along well), but his trouble with names is indicative of Renaud's ambivalent relationship to the individuality each of his tricks. They are plentiful, for one—twenty five in the span of five months, with a few encounters that do not classify as tricks in between—and, as I have discussed previously, all share remarkable similarities and repetitions. Jacques' brother generally fits Renaud's type, but he is also especially short. Renaud seems to be of an average enough height to not demand comment throughout the work. “We were both standing. I was leaning against the wall, but I kept my feet as far apart as possible, in order to make myself closer to his height. Then, fearing that this positing would seem too artificial and too obvious, I straightened up, taller by head and shoulders than he, which was no less embarrassing.” (31) These moments are appealing and penetrating because they highlight the inherent instability of the socially constructed identity for gay men. They call to the essential humanity of the individuals trapped by the system that attempts—often successfully—to

force them into a mechanistic pattern of eternally repeated, purposeless sex. The moments of Renaud's stumbling are the moments where the prescribed dialogue, blocking, and action of each encounter, and each relationship between each queer male, starts to break down. They are more cracks in a large and oppressive wall.

These cracks, however, are few and far between. Gay men in the racial majority have a certain set of cultural expectations inscribed upon them. For gay men of color the damage is compounded. While men of color do not appear regularly in *Tricks* (as Renaud's tastes run especially toward hirsute blondes), the text closes with an encounter with a black man. Terence is Renaud's twenty fifth trick. Renaud is at this point in the text partially reunited with a long-term partner, Tony, who has been haunting the pages of the novel, though their connection seems fairly loose (this may just be the result of him not being the principal focus of the text, however. The book is, after all, explicitly about Renaud's tricks). Renaud and Tony are visiting with a female friend of Tony's outside Washington, D. C.. They visit a club called *Mr. P*. Renaud approximates a population of twenty or so dancing in the bar. He immediately notices a Parisian he had met before “flanked by a colossal black man” (239). The Parisian had been, when Renaud last saw him, was similarly keeping the company of a black man who was “also built like a brick shithouse” (239). He later notices “a black who immediately struck me as by far the handsomest boy in the place” (239). His full description encodes, even as it defines it oppositionally, the stereotypical notions of black male sexuality:

...except for his very dark skin and rather kinky hair, he possessed none of the features traditionally attributed to his race. He had an aquiline nose,

thin lips, very fine features, and a very thick moustache.

He was rather tall and broad-shouldered, but not at all massively built. His hands were long and delicate. He had a striking physical elegance, and he was dressed accordingly: jeans and a white shirt. (240)

An objectification and essentialization takes place in his examination of Terence's body, an unconscious projection of idealized and constructed norms about black male sexuality (even as he finds him all the more appealing because of his conventionally European facial features). The trend continues even more pronouncedly when Terence's clothes come off:

Terence's body was an anatomy lesson. His skin was very fine. Under it you could see each of his muscles, clearly articulated, admirably distinct. None save those of his buttocks and his thighs was particularly developed and prominent, but all were readily observable and incredibly hard. His stomach was especially remarkable. It displayed a rigorous grid, very detailed, which was divided by a line of very soft hairs that rose toward his chest, spreading out there in a palm leaf design. The buttocks and thighs were those of a dancer, powerful and bulging. (243)

Of course, "His cock was very large as were his balls" (243). What else could so essentialized a rendering show? Their copulation is prolific and enjoyable. Eventually, when Tony joins them in bed, Terence's sexuality is such that he is able to satisfy both Tony and Renaud at the same time. Terence's description reflects the multiplicative product of the hypersexual rendering by heteronorminal power of both his ethnicity and

his sexuality. Renaud develops a theory about Terence over the course of their brief acquaintance. He philosophizes that he, as “a foreigner, a Frenchman”, was able to escape “all the racial codes he knew. Of course, he [Terence] wouldn't have put it this way, and no doubt he wasn't conscious of the procedure I am attributing to him” (246). Even as he disclaims his participation in the enactment of the “racial codes” that bind each of them, he similarly enforces them. He is surprised, for example, that Terence is interested in an exhibit of seventeenth-century French paintings he and his friends visit. He was “afraid that Terence would have only the vaguest interest in canvases by Patel, Lemaire, Mellin, or some pseudo-Poussin or other. But he seemed full of curiosity and examined them all, one by one, with great care and much enthusiasm.” (244) That Terence expresses interest at all in the cultural artifacts Renaud finds dear surprises him speaks volumes of his own whole and entire adoption of erroneous cultural norms concerning race. His language is telling; his “curiosity”, his “great care and enthusiasm”, suggests something approaching primitivism. He is as unconscious about his participation in the subjugation of people of color as he is unconscious of his own self-subjugation through failing to critically analyze his own queer identity.

Satisfaction mingles perpetually in *Tricks* with dissatisfaction, especially in the case of Alain who it is reported to Renaud from another source that “I turn him on.” (91). Alain's appeal to Renaud, however, is minimal. He “doesn't attract me much physically: a short boy with a brown moustache, medium-length hair, and something about the shape of his chin or his nose which gives him a vaguely bulldog look that's not exactly becoming” (91). Despite this, Renaud still pursues him because “there was no one around

who interested me more, and the determination of his attention turned me on somewhat.” (91). He relates this lack of attraction repeatedly—“To tell the truth, I wasn't at all sure I wanted to go home with him, there wasn't much about him that turned me on except the desire he seemed to have for me, which he seemed to have had for a long time” (93)—and Renaud directs him after their meeting in the *Manhattan* around Paris in Alain's Renault to procrastinate from the inevitable (and unenviable) commingling in bed to come later. Like Alain's car is impelled by its mechanical processes and chemistry of combustion, Renaud is driven ever forward toward continual copulation by the rigid definition of his sexual identity provided to him by dominant images of gay men, even as he consciously knows that that his intercourse with Alain will be in every way an unsatisfying experience. The definition of his identity is provided so forcefully for him that he is incapable of escaping it, despite his conscious acknowledgment that his behavior will not provide him emotional, physical, or spiritual satisfaction.

Of course there is more to Renaud's life than the substance of *Tricks* conveys. He is an accomplished novelist. He is politically aware. Of course he is more than an ambulatory abdomen, all penis and rectum (with an awkwardly attached mouth, perhaps), but the evidence of his wholer personhood is not shown in detail. Readers of *Tricks* receive hints—just hints—that there is more to Renaud than what he does for pleasure. So central to his identity is Renaud's prodigious sexuality that the rest can be almost entirely excluded without rendering irreparably inaccurate the image of the self. *Tricks* shows how, in the earliest days of an open queer sexuality, the centrality of sex and sexuality was enlarged to so aggrandized a proportion of the gay identity as to be

fallacious, even monstrously so. Is it any surprise that gay men, in the era of queer history that followed the sexual revolution (by which I mean the era of the AIDS epidemic, which I discuss in much more detail in the following section) were demonized as creatures of pure rauch whose incubitic depravity was the sole cause of and just punishment for their decline, confusion, suffering, and death in the health crisis that destroyed so many queer lives? Leo Bursani has written extensively on this topic. To represent his stance accurately I will quote him at length:

I want to make a different point, a point understandably less popular with those impatient to be freed of oppressive and degrading self-definitions. What I'm saying is that a gay man doesn't run the risk of loving his oppressor only in the ways in which blacks or Jews might more or less secretly collaborate with their oppressors-that is, as a consequence of the oppression, of that subtle corruption by which a slave can come to idolize power, to agree that he should be enslaved because he is enslaved, that he should be denied power because he doesn't have any. But blacks and Jews don't become blacks and Jews as a result of that internalization of an oppressive mentality, whereas that internalization is in part constitutive of male homosexual desire, which, like all sexual desire, combines and confuses impulses to appropriate and to identify with the object of desire. An authentic gay male political identity therefore implies a struggle not only against definitions of maleness and of homosexuality as they are reiterated and imposed in a heterosexist social discourse, but also against

those very same definitions so seductively and so faithfully reflected by those (in large part culturally invented and elaborated) male bodies that we carry within us as permanently renewable sources of excitement. (209)

Bursani argues here that the linchpin of gay male sexuality, the chief subject of *Tricks*, is the way in which male sexuality (and specifically the ever-prowling male hypersexuality rendered so clearly in *Tricks*) forms the essence of gay male sexuality. He frames his argument as a logical tautology. Aggressive male sexuality, even though it is admittedly a social construction, establishes aggressive male sexuality. It is an ouroboros deified in the gay male psyche, self-contained, complete, impenetrable. I take issue with his definition of the concreteness of the definition of maleness. He himself asserts that masculinity and the masculinity gay men often fetishize is a social construction. When society changes, as it did (and as Bursani mourned) in the wake of the AIDS era, or with the awareness of individual men of their own subjectivity, masculinity itself can also change.

Chapter Six: On *Angels in America*

If Camus' *Tricks* tells the story of an identity subsumed by the wholesale adoption of destructive heteronormative images of queer people's sexuality as rabid, Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, the first part (*Millennium Approaches*) of which was first performed in 1990 and the second part of which (*Perestroika*) was first performed in 1991, tells the epilogue of the performance of that identity. The story takes place between October, 1985 and February, 1986, when the AIDS epidemic had crashed into the gay consciousness (and into gay bodies) like a tidal wave. There is also an epilogue that takes place in the winter of 1990, but the bulk of this writing will focus on what transpires before the epilogue. It is the height of the Reagan era. The revolutions of the sixties and seventies in which boundaries separating sexualities, genders, races, and classes, the myriad intersections of identity, had faded; the boundaries separating each from the other became more forcefully reentrenched under the swaggering hypermasculine and hyperpatriarchal persona of America's movie star President. The accomplishments of the sexual revolution and all its queering of accepted norms crumpled under the ponderous bulk of the conservative revolution and the self-proclaimed moral majority.

By the start of *Angels in America* the AIDS epidemic is in full swing, particularly in gay ghettos like New York where *Angels in America* takes place. Gay men with compromised immune systems die in droves. The character around which the story is ultimately framed, Prior Walter, reveals within the first moments of the play a Kaposi's

Sarcoma lesion, a symptom of a heavily compromised immune system, to his boyfriend of four and a half years. He calls it “The wine-dark kiss of the angel of death”, flippantly announces his status as “a lesionnaire.” (27). His boyfriend, Louis Ironson, struggles and eventually fails to be able to cope with the consequences and symptoms of Prior's disease. Louis becomes entangled (I hesitate qualify with the term “romantically” as their attachment, though intensely felt, is mainly one-sided) entangled with Joe Pitt, the Mormon intellectual and ideological (if not spiritual) successor to the infamous McCarthyite homunculus Roy Cohn. Like Cohn, Joe is a deeply closeted gay man. Unlike Cohn, Joe is a married man. His wife, Harper Pitt, Valium-addicted and marginally deranged, has moments of prophesy and preternatural vision and helps to serve as a vehicle for the more mystical and otherworldly, the fantastical, in a play that is as much about the divine as it is about the earthbound.

The main thrust of the plot (though it branches in many places) revolves around Prior's visionary experiences, his transformation from a very ill WASP-born occasional caterer to a prophet working in the Biblical mode. It is difficult to say conclusively whether his visions are real—whether he is actually visited and transformed by an angelic figure—or are simply the results of a combination of the mental degradation that often follows the AIDS virus coupled as it is with his extremely aggressive pharmacological treatments (which early on were incredibly rough on the human body and mind, and which today, despite what pharmaceutical advertising copy might suggest, are still no sunny walk in the park). He is visited by a hermaphroditic angel who compels him to lead his earthbound kin, all humankind, to a point of cessation, to a termination of momentum.

S/he orders him (and through him, humanity), to:

ANGEL. ...Before Life on Earth becomes finally merely

Impossible,

It will for a long time before have become completely

unbearable.

(Coughs)

YOU HAVE DRIVEN HIM AWAY! YOU MUST

STOP MOVING! (178)

S/he argues that human progress and their capacity for mutability, change, and dynamism drew God's attention away from Heaven, and over time God left Paradise entirely.

Heaven is a desiccating and dying place, rocked by perpetual earthquakes. Heaven is dying without the Divine presence. The Angel begs Prior and humanity:

ANGEL *(Softly)*.

Forsake the Open Road:

Neither Mix Nor Intermarry: Let Deep Roots Grow:

If you do not MINGLE you will Cease to Progress:

Seek Not to Fathom the World and its Delicate

Particle Logic:

You cannot Understand, You can only Destroy,

You do not Advance, You only Trample.

Poor blind Children, abandoned on the Earth,

Groping, terrified, misguided, over

Fields of Slaughter, over bodies of the Slain:

HORRIBLE YOURSELVES!

There is No Zion Save Where You Are! (178-9)

Of course Prior (and through him humanity) rejects the Angel's plea; how could he (and we) do anything else? The work by which human beings exist and perpetuate themselves (in any sense) is a process definitionally organic and messy, one unceasingly prone to flux. Perversely, however, the flux of the death and chaos that followed the worst days of the AIDS epidemic, which I argue was made as severe as it was by the voracious queer sexuality forced onto gay men, was also the undoing, in part, of that image on a macrosocial scale. When the AIDS epidemic became contained (I will not say was ended; it persists even today) individuals could, having been woken up to the very real consequences of enacting an identity foisted upon them with the goal of catalyzing their implosion, chose to live more conscious lives and to enact more carefully negotiated sexualities (as we will see the initial stirrings of when I discuss Larry Duplechan's *Blackbird*). Institutions that I have previously called attention to (The Mattachine Society, the Daughters of Bilitis) called for a broader structural change toward a queer sexuality that mirrored the more “virtuous”—full skepticism quotes in force—sexuality of the heterosexuals they wanted to emulate in almost every way, but could not do the work they wanted to do because there was no substantive impetus for change. The AIDS crisis provided, on an institutional level, that impetus.

Angels in America is at its core a text about transgressing boundaries, about crossing borderlands. It opens with this theme explicitly. The first scene is a funeral for

Louis' grandmother, Sarah Ironson. The Rabbi who officiates over the ceremony does not know her well, but is acquainted with women of her generation. He says of her:

RABBI ISIDOR CHEMELWITZ. ...So I do not know her and yet I know her...

(He touches the coffin)

...not a person but a whole kind of person, the ones who crossed the ocean, who brought with us to America the villages of Russia and Lithuania—and how we struggled, and how we fought, for the family, for the Jewish home, so that you would not grow up *here*, in this strange place, in the melting pot where nothing melted. Descendents of this immigrant woman, you do not grow up in America, you and your children and their children with the goyische names. You do not live in America. No such place exists. Your clay is the clay of some Litvak shetl, your air the air of the steppes—because she carried the old world on her back across the ocean, in a boat, and she put it down on Grand Concourse Avenue, or in Flatbush, and she worked that earth into your bones, and you pass it to your children, this ancient, ancient culture and home.

(Little pause)

You can never make that crossing that she made, for such Great Voyages in this world do not any more exist. But every day of your lives the miles that voyage between that place and this one you cross. Every day. You understand me? In you that journey is. (16-7)

As much as Louis, as a descendent of Sarah Ironson, is a man involved in perpetual transgression, so too are all the principal characters in the text. The Jewish characters' state of perpetual crossing has already been described. Belize, as a black man, is a reverberating product of a far less easily romanticized voyage than the one taken by Sarah Ironson. The Pitt family—Joe, Joe's wife Harper, and Joe's mother Hannah—are all Mormons, all products of an overland migration and flight from persecution. Their migration is still in their bones and in their culture. Prior Walter's American lineage comes from the Mayflower forward, another westward migration from religious persecution. Borders and their crossings are part of the essential fiber of of the characters in the play. This includes the crossing of definitional and political borders.

Of all the play's characters Belize in particular is the most attentive to the permeability of boundaries separating things and concepts, and for numerous reasons. The diasporaic journey etched into his bones I have already alluded to. Belize's real name is Norman Arriaga. Belize is his drag name, but it becomes his primary name, suggesting a further and perpetual border crossing between gender and class as well. Belize epitomizes, more so even than the hermaphroditic angel who moves freely between Paradise and Earth, the way in which borders are untenable and permeable. He revels in these crossings. Roy Cohn, as a patient in the nursing ward where Belize works as a nurse, asks him one night while somewhat delirious (his particular viral load brought him the gift of excruciating stomach cramps; he was regularly treated with a steady morphine drip) asks him what heaven will be like. Belize eagerly traverses into the role of the angel of death Cohn encourages him to step into and describes heaven as:

BELIZE. Mmmm.

Big city, overgrown with weeds, but flowering weeds. On every corner a wrecking crew and something new and crooked going up catty-corner to that. Windows missing in every edifice like broken teeth, fierce gusts of gritty wind, and a gray high sky full of ravens.

...

BELIZE. And everyone in Balenciaga gowns with red corsages, and big dance palaces full of music and lights and racial impurity and gender confusion.

(Roy laughs softly, delighted.)

BELIZE. And all the deities are creole, mulatto, brown as the mouths of rivers.

(Roy laughs again.)

BELIZE. Race, taste, and history finally overcome.

And you ain't there. (210)

In this scene Belize claims a certain rightful mastery over definitions and borders, a mastery Roy Cohn forsake in his long career as a Joseph McCarthy's lackey and later a Washington power-broker.

Roy has embraced wholly the dominant cultural definition of his person—his Jewishness magnified and distorted like some bit of fascist propaganda, Shylock squared,

and his sexuality is one totally subject to destructive notions of queer sexuality. He remains utterly committed to maintaining the appearance of his heterosexuality in spite of overwhelming evidence, including his doctor's treatment of venereal warts in his rectum and the AIDS (which he insisted on branding as liver cancer even as he took copious antiretroviral drugs) which eventually killed him, that his primary sexual relations—he has no substantive emotional relations—have been with men.

David Savran has written compellingly about how the ways in which borders and definitions are rendered permeable and mutable in *Angels*:

Throughout *Angels in America*, the utopia/dystopia coupling (wherein disaster becomes simultaneously the marker for and incitement to think Paradise) plays itself out through a host of binary oppositions: heaven/hell, forgiveness/retribution, communitarianism/individualism, spirit/flesh, pleasure/pain, beauty/decay, future/ past, homosexuality/heterosexuality, rationalism/indeterminacy, migration/staying put, progress/stasis, life/death. Each of these functions not just as a set of conceptual poles in relation to which characters and themes are worked out and interpreted, but also as an oxymoron, a figure of undecidability whose contradictory being becomes an incitement to think the impossible-revolution. For it is precisely the conjunction of opposites that allows what Benjamin calls "the flow of thoughts" to be given a "shock" and so turned into "the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening" (262-63). The oxymoron, in other words, becomes the privileged figure by which the unimaginable allows

itself to be imagined. (212)

Forcing rigidly defined and disparate elements of identity into conflict with one another serves to highlight the definitional instability of each. What *Angels* reveals is that the elements of identity politics, forced as they often are upon subjugated people in the service of justifying their subjugation, are not as rigid as they seem: borders which seem concrete are in fact porous.

This is not to say that all boundaries are transgressed with great ease. The entrenched definition of a gay male as one who skulks perpetually, detachedly from one encounter to another persists in *Angels*. Louis does not react well (to say the least) to Prior's illness. He is unable to cope fully with the sheer viscerality of Prior's symptoms—the blood, the sweat, the diarrhea—and asks him directly in bed one evening:

LOUIS. What if I walked out on this?

Would you hate me forever?

(Prior kisses Louis on the forehead.)

PRIOR. Yes. (46)

Prior demands (though lovingly so) the compassion he is arguably entitled to receive from someone who loves him as his own life starts to wind toward a close. Louis is unable to show compassion to Prior, however, and when his condition spirals wildly out of control, his reaction after getting him to the hospital and making sure he is stable is to cruise Central Park's Ramble for a random sexual encounter, conventional queer sexuality's safe harbor in all storms. The conversation between Louis and his temporary partner, and really their whole encounter (in HBO's filmed version of the play *The Man is*

costumed in typical over the top butch leather attire, even) is scripted, prescribed to a laughable degree. Louis, at least, is aware of the absurdity even as he is impelled forward toward its completion:

MAN. What do you want?

LOUIS. I want you to fuck me, hurt me, make me bleed.

MAN. I want to.

LOUIS. Yeah?

MAN. I want to hurt you.

LOUIS. Fuck me.

MAN. Yeah?

LOUIS. Hard.

MAN. Yeah? You been a bad boy?

(Pause. Louis laughs, softly.)

LOUIS. Very bad. Very bad.

MAN. You need to be punished, boy?

LOUIS. Yes. Yes I do.

MAN. Yes what?

(Little pause.)

LOUIS. Um, I . . .

MAN. Yes *what*, boy?

LOUIS. Oh. Yes sir. (60-1)

Their dialogic exchange is little more boilerplate for gay male pornography in the

masochistic mode. Their encounter lacks any real substance. They try to find some place to go for their coitus and fail (Louis is unable to bring him to the home he shares with Prior, and the butch man, most dissonantly, lives with his parents). They try to copulate in the park, but Louis is unable to relax enough to be the receptive partner. The butch man's condom breaks, the two have a heated dialogue, and the man leaves in short order (having literally slapped Louis in the face for his acerbic remarks). Even though he finds it wrong, as suggested by his soft, derisive laugh when he is asked if he's been a "bad boy", so strong is the definition of how he should relate to Prior that he is unable to stand by him when he needs him most, and when supporting Prior would likely be a vastly more satisfying emotional and personal experience than the failed romp in the park with the random man. Louis' ability to love is one sorely constrained by his own internalized essentialization of his sexuality. When Prior has more or less recovered and is in a period of better health Louis attempts to reconcile with him, though not to resume their relationship. Louis tries to be conciliatory and admits he was wrong; Prior is furious with Louis for his abandonment and for his electing to spend the time Prior was on the verge of death in bed with Joe Pitt. Prior speaks with full conviction when he tells Louis:

PRIOR. You cry, but you endanger nothing in yourself. It's like the idea of crying when you do it.

Or the idea of love. (217)

Earlier, even while Prior, barely recovered and hospital-bound as a result of a serious infection, Louis told Prior he could not afford him the decency of treatment reasonably expected by a partner of four and a half years and in the middle of an epidemic. Prior,

understandably, was profoundly upset by Louis' declaration:

PRIOR (*Shattered; almost pleading; trying to reach him*): I'm dying! You stupid fuck! Do you know what that is! Love! Do you know what love means! We lived together four-and-a-half years, you animal, you idiot.

LOUIS. I have to find some way to save myself.

Louis' ability to love is drastically impeded by the manner of his socialization as a gay man, which makes untenable the creation of lasting bonds of relationship. It is not enough for queer people to embrace their queerness and live lives true to their sexual and emotional primary attachments. Their queerness sets them apart, places them into a permanently oppositional relationship with dominant societal norms. Living openly but unquestioningly produces men like Louis, men who, though deep thinkers, though honoring their sexual selves, are also hollow husks, prone victims, alone even when physically coupled with others. Queer people must definitionally be iconoclasts. We see a strong example of this iconoclasm in Larry Duplechan's *Blackbird*.

Chapter Seven: On *Blackbird*

It is striking (if not entirely surprising) that Larry Duplechan's *Blackbird*, first published, in 1986, has received almost no critical attention. Michael Nava's introduction to the book's 2006 reprint suggests that it is the first African-American coming out story (17), and I have found no evidence to the contrary. Gay black men have appeared before in fiction, but they are generally mired in the expected shame and guilt. *Blackbird* presents an alternate vision, one in which the consequence of homosexuality is something vastly more expansive and rewarding than the misery and death of pre-Stonewall texts.

Perhaps Duplechan's text has been largely ignored because it is sweet. I mean that in the best way possible: the good-kid nature of the text's protagonist, Johnnie Ray Rousseau, permeates the book (it is, after all, written in the first person singular). It mirrors the adolescent verge-of-self-awareness sense Johnnie Ray himself has of the world, and which he eventually crosses over into fully. It is straightforward (not simple), honest (hiding nothing). Its characters may be a bit overstated at times, but in the sort of way teenagers often actually are. The most overstated character, Johnnie Ray's best friend Efrem, is overstated in the way camp and campiness are often overstated. He reads a bit like a young, brown-haired Truman Capote, even down to aspiring to be a writer and having quite a talent for it; the way in which he is overstated is not necessarily bad, just unexpected in a work of literature.

The text is ultimately a queer take on the bildungsroman. *Blackbird* is set in the

middle of the 1970's. Johnnie Ray Rousseau lives in a relatively small Californian town a hundred miles outside of Los Angeles. His is one of the smaller number of African-American families that live in the white part of town—the town, much like the country in the middle seventies, was divided on racial lines. He is a talented singer (the school's “very best tenor” (36)) and actor. His best friend Efrem I have already mentioned. A girl, also African-American, named Cherie is in love with him. Johnnie Ray, conversely, is in love with, or at least is infatuated with, a few different people—Skipper Harris, Todd Waterson, and his gym coach—though all are quite heterosexual and whose affection is as likely to be reciprocated in earnest as Jonnie Ray's is to Cherie. If this was a text operating in the pre-Stonewall mode, Johnnie Ray would likely have bedded at least one of his crushes, felt demeaned by the experience, and died a terrible death by the conclusion of the book. This is not such a text. Instead, Johnnie Ray, at least for a while, gets a boyfriend. The history I have presented should make clear how radical a shift from queer literary history this is.

Johnnie Ray auditions for his school play, something schlockish called (not without a touch of irony) *Hooray for Love*. It is about the best his conservative town's public school theater can manage. What it cannot manage, however, is seeing black Johnnie Ray paired with any of the white actresses who were cast in the female roles. No black young women auditioned, and the definition of love is so concretely prescribed and sterile that it cannot tolerate even a suggestion of racial mixing. Hooray indeed. The role of Romeo goes to a vastly inferior actor, and Johnnie Ray is given the task of student directing. He refuses to accept the subordinate position forced upon him, and confronts

the school's drama teacher, Mr. Brock:

“There's one reason and only one reason why I wasn't cast, and you know what is is as well as I do. Why couldn't you go against this goddamn town just once? Just once? 'Cause you're a goddamn racist, just like most of this town, that's why, you old – why the hell couldn't you just –” And I was so angry and hurt and frustrated I thought I might throw a chair through a window or something, so I turned to leave. Then I whipped back around.

“And furthermore, you can take your goddamn student directorship and just sit on it and rotate! I wouldn't student direct if you *paid* me!” And I started down the stairs again. Stopped. Turned around and walked back to the door. (71)

In his refusal to do what is expected of him, in his refusal to accept scraps when his talent demands something much better, he is forging his own identity. That identity runs contrary to the racist and heterosexist views of dominant culture, represented here in Mr. Brock's vice-tight control over the ethnic makeup of his cast.

Johnnie Ray's rejection of the school's production leads him to bigger and better things. Instead of acting in a high school production of a hackneyed play, he turns his attention to an open casting call at a junior college's film class. There he meets Marshall MacNiell. Marshall is a film student himself, though he has volunteered in this case to help a fellow student with a film she is making. The film's director, Libby, is making a film called *Lockup*. It attempts to demonstrate what life on the inside of a prison is like.

While the screenplay itself is not particularly good, it is a vast improvement over *Hooray for Love* and the subject material it deals with is shocking for its day. Johnnie Ray talks his way into the part by lying about his age (Libby wants him to be eighteen; he is seventeen and a half), and has no qualms about forging a signature from his parents to get the appearance of their consent in working on a project they would never consent to. Again he rejects the definition of self figures of authority—in this case, his parents—would force upon him. Johnnie Ray grows bolder when Libby asks if he would object to the way the screenplay handles the topic of homosexuality:

A chill started at my toes, flew up the length of me, and shot out through the top of my head. I wouldn't have been surprised if my hair had stood straight up.

“Does that bother you?” Libby stared me dead in the eyes.

“No,” I said, fighting a tremble.

“You sure?”

“Sure,” I said, hoping I sounded surer than I felt.

“Course it doesn't bother little Johnnie Ray.” Marshall smiled and raised an eyebrow at me. “Does it?” And from the way he said that, I got the feeling it was a serious question, like he was trying to get me to admit something. And for some reason, I got kind of bold. I just looked Marshall square in the face and said, “Nope. Not a bit.” (87-8)

This coming out, essentially to a random stranger, is a very forward move for Johnnie Ray. At this point in the text he is only out to three people: his primary crush Skipper, his

youth pastor, and his confidante Cherie. In an era where outing oneself carried with it a substantially more serious danger than it carries today (though for many adolescents it is still unsafe), dangers Johnnie Ray later suffers the consequences of, his coming out represents a moment of negotiated self-definition: he communicates to Marshall that his flirtation will not be rejected out of hand, but does so in a way that does not compromise his integrity or as safety as much as he could. Rather than receiving reprimand for transgressing the boundaries of sexual normativity, Marshall instead flirts openly with him. His attention is reciprocated. And rather than dwelling in shame, Johnnie Ray revels in the reciprocal affection:

I was so full of feelings, I felt like I was a balloon and the birthday boy was blowing me up, and my chest could just burst any second. I felt strangely happy, happier than I could remember ever feeling before; yet a lump grew in my throat, and I felt tears in my eyes. My fingers still felt Marshall's touch, and I found myself repeating Marshall Marshall Marshall like a mantra.

It was one very powerful, extremely confusing collection of feelings. So much so that I found it practically impossible for a long while to do much of anything. I spent the next couple of hours just lying back on my bed. No music on or anything.

I just lay there and just *felt*. (103)

This is not to say that Johnnie Ray has not internalized a young lifetime's worth of homophobia. Following his first encounter with Marshall, he wants desperately to

confide in his best friend Efrem. Efrem is also fiercely loyal to Johnnie Ray, and Efrem's affect adheres closely to the gay male stereotype. It is a fairly safe bet that Efrem is himself a gay male (as he is later revealed to be), yet Johnnie Ray is unable to confide in him:

And Efrem said, "What's on your mind, Clem?" And I wanted to, God how I wanted to tell him! It would have poured out of my mouth like Kool-Aid from a pitcher: "His name is Marshall Two-Hawks MacNiel and his eyebrows and his ears and O-my-God his smile and he's part Cherokee and I think he likes me and God Bless America, I think he's even gay!"

I didn't say that, of course. I just said, "Nothing." Efrem didn't believe me, of course. Neither did Cherie. Who would? (107)

This is an experience I recognize from my own semi-closeted queer adolescence some twenty five years after Johnnie Ray's: the attempt to isolate one's own queerness from the queerness of others as though too much queerness in one place could suddenly reach a critical mass and go fissile. More devastatingly, Cherie talks Johnnie Ray into having sex with her in an attempt to find a heterosexuality that does not exist in him. It is a disastrous encounter, over in seconds, that leaves Johnnie Ray (obviously) unconverted and miserable and Cherie in tears.

I want to avoid conveying the impression that the queers are the only people who suffer from the imposition of a normative sexual agenda in the text. Destructive attempts to normalize sexuality permeate the work, and affect young men and women of all sexual proclivities. Todd Waterson and his girlfriend Leslie, who is also Johnnie Ray's pastor's

daughter, unintentionally conceive a child. Leslie is sent away to have her child because it is “a disgrace” (59) to the pastor; how could he steer the lives of his flock in a more conventionally moral way if he could not provide that guidance to his own daughter? The pressure to adhere to norms of sexual behavior is so intensely felt that the parents and family are split from one another in an attempt to deaden the feelings of shame. So strong is the pressure to adhere to conventional definitions of sexuality that Leslie tries to abort the child using a pair of knitting needles (134). The attempt kills her, and with her, the fetus. Todd, unable to cope with the grief and guilt associated with Leslie's attempted abortion and related death, later kills himself. Comparatively speaking, the gay men—perhaps because the expectations for them are radically lower—fare vastly better than the heterosexual deviants.

The truth, irrepressible, eventually finds its way to the surface, both for Efrem and Johnnie Ray and with serious consequences for each. Efrem's father catches him in a physical encounter with another male and beats him so savagely that he has to be hospitalized for weeks. His transgression of the law of sexual normativity was in its way the most severe in the text. Not only was he caught in the act of having sex with another male, but the male he was having sex with was black and older than himself. The attempt to control his sexuality, to force him to adhere to rigid definitions of sexual behavior, comes swiftly and violently. Efrem's family explains his abuse as an accident, claiming (absurdly) that he fell down some stairs. Johnnie Ray's coming out is instead uncomfortably forced upon him when his youth pastor, Daniel, breaks the confidence Johnnie Ray placed in him and tells his parents the confession he made to him:

...I suddenly found myself confronted with the unpleasant spectacle of Daniel, obviously having spilled the old beans to Mom and Dad, looking as holy and righteous at having done so as my parents looked utterly devastated at the news. All three heads turned as I shut the front door behind me.

Dad wept. Mother glowered. Daniel – amazingly – smiled.

“Hello, Johnnie Ray,” he said. “We’ve been waiting for you.”

I could scarcely believe this was happening. It was as if the world was coming to an end with both a bang and a whimper. I took a seat across from Mom and Dad. Mom sat ramrod stiff, with a Gale Sondergaard sort of a sneer on her face; Dad looked as if he hadn’t slept in a week of nights, his eyes bright red from crying. (176)

His father cries (troubling for Johnnie Ray because he has never seen his father cry, not even at his own father’s funeral); his mother calls him a pervert and claims Johnnie Ray’s sexuality was an fabrication made only to cause them pain. Daniel the youth pastor claims that Johnnie Ray is possessed by “unclean spirits” (179) and that, with an exorcism, Johnnie Ray can be “cured.” They almost immediately bring him to someone who performs them, though his parents are, if desperate, also skeptical. The scene that follows shows, in a way that is both hilarious and heartbreaking, the absurdity of the incongruity between the love Johnnie Ray’s parents feel for him and their investment in normative sexual paradigms:

“Let us pray.” He [the exorcist] closed his eyes tight. “Lord Jesus” –

he held the first syllable of Jesus way out, and a bit off the second – “let your blessed Holy Spirit be with us here this day, and give us your precious healing pow-ah. I pray in the name of Jay-zuss. Ayyy-men.”

Mom and Dad and Daniel amen'd back. It occurred to me that this Solomon person had watched entirely too many Billy Graham crusades on TV. He had quite a well-developed sense of the dramatic, and an obviously affected in again/out again Boston Clam Chowder accent. I'd walked into this thing with a certain skepticism. I wasn't any too sure I really wanted to be cured of my homosexuality; and I certainly didn't believe this young man (who looked more like a J.C. Student than a great Deliverer) could cure me even if I *was* sure I wanted it.

I'd only agreed to come at all out of utter depression. I knew there was no way I could make myself straight. I like guys. I like liking guys... Besides, considering my parents' reaction to the news of what they (wrongly) believed to be unnatural desires as not yet acted upon, what real choice did I have? Unfortunately, I wasn't sure sure I was going to be able to keep a straight face through much of Solomon Hunt's Jay-zussing all over the place. (184-5)

Johnnie Ray lets him work himself damp with sweat and hoarse from prayer in his attempt to exorcise Johnnie Ray's “unclean spirits”, but realizes in fairly short order that no divine intervention is going to take place. Nothing can cure him because he is not ill. He recognizes the absurdity of the situation even as he feels compassion for the people

surrounding him and wanting what they think—wrongly, if genuinely—is best for him. They need to believe what they need to believe, so Johnnie Ray negotiates:

I screamed.

I sucked in a good long breath and screamed from the top of my falsetto to the bottoms of my feet. I screamed to do Fay Wray proud. The term blood-curdling would not have constituted hyperbole.

Needless to say, I stopped the show. Solomon stopped delivering. Mom and Dad and Daniel stopped Hallelujahing. Mrs. Hunt emerged from the kitchen, where she'd been keeping herself conveniently busy and out of the way for the entire proceedings. (187-8)

Johnnie Ray does not give away his queerness under pressure to subscribe to a normative sexuality, nor does he react in a totally contrary way and embrace a gay identity to the exclusion of his family. He creates a negotiated identity, one that allows him to remain attached to his family (and that gives them a chance to grow to become more tolerant) without being disingenuous to his queer identity. He does not give in to any polarized identity constructs, but instead constructs his own identity. He bides his time, waits out his graduation, and begins to live an open life at college, surrounded by queer people who he associates with as peers.

It is in some ways fitting to conclude the broader section on works of fiction with a work that is, at least in part, autobiographical in nature. Duplechan is obviously not Johnnie Ray, but there is significant overlap between the two. In an interview of the author by Mark Macdonald Duplechan calls Johnnie Ray a:

character who is (in most major respects) very much like me... some of the situations are based on my personal life experiences, and some are not.

Johnnie's attitudes – likes, dislikes, pet peeves, romantic/sexual preferences – are probably 99.9% mine, at least the “me” that I was at the time each book was written, and not, please note, necessarily the “me” I was at the time the story in each book takes place. (qtd. in Duplechan 243)

Of course Duplechan's remembrances are embellished and reshaped to fit a work of fiction. It goes almost without saying. The same could be said of Camus' *Tricks*. What is invigorating about Duplechan's work, and what helps me resist the temptation to ossify into a state of permanent cynicism, is how *Blackbird*'s autobiographical elements reflect the changing nature of queer identity. In Camus, queer identity was subsumed wholly to the search for hedonistic, ultimately unsatisfying pleasure. In Duplechan, a wholer humanity shines through, resisting dominant, destructive narratives about gay men.

Conclusion

More than anything else, what this work has attempted to do was show that expectations of queer behavior, when those expectations are defined by the dominant, patriarchal, heterosexist figures who (even subtly) serve not as a vehicle to understand queer people, but as a justification for their perpetual subjugation. Their subjugation can be violent or it can be subtle. For an ostracized people the temptation to adhere to easily understood norms of behavior is strongly felt, even when that temptation leads ultimately to an undesirable conclusion—far better to be known and acknowledged quantity rather than an aberration, even if dominantly-dictated queer subjectivity leads only to misery, isolation, and death.

The question would seem to be, then, how strongly to define queer sexuality *against* the queer archetype of isolation, endless random sexual encounters, eventual illness and despair. Yet neither is the answer to swing too radically to the opposite side away from the counterproductive paradigm of queer sexuality. Strict monogamy is of course the binary of rabid copulation, but it is often as untenable as its opposite. Quiet, gender-normative behavior is the inverse of a pronounced queer affect, but both extremes are often characteristically, aggravated renditions of archetypal behavior that rarely if ever reflects the complexity and contradiction of a human personality. As *Tricks* shows, adhering to expected behavioral norms for queer male sexuality produces only short-term satisfaction, and then only rarely. As *Angels in America* shows clearly, binaries simply

fail. Anzaldúa has written that the “despot duality” (19) of binarism is ultimately unsalvageable and irredeemable. She writes that “It claims that human nature is limited and cannot evolve into something better. But I, like other queer people, am two in one body, both male and female. I am the embodiment of the *hieros gamos*: the coming together of opposite qualities within.” (19) Binaries should blend, should marry into a negotiated whole. Neither side wholly applies. It is a sentiment with which Judith Butler agrees:

When such categories come into question, the *reality* of gender is also put into crisis: it becomes unclear how to distinguish the real from the unreal. And this is the occasion in which we come to understand that what we take to be “real,” what we invoke as the naturalized knowledge of gender is, in fact, a changeable and revisable reality. Call it subversive or call it something else. Although this insight does not in itself constitute a political revolution, no political revolution is possible without a radical shift in one's notion of the possible and the real... At this point, the sedimented and reified field of gender 'reality' is understood as one that might be made differently and, indeed, less violently. (100)

Like we see in *Blackbird*, neither extreme finds purchase in the self. Only through negotiation between two poles can a genuine expression of identity that honors the veracity of the individual queer person be found.

Though the texts I have chosen to write about are chiefly from an era we are no longer a part of, the complexities and issues they deal with are still, to my amazement,

resonant today. A rigidly defined sexuality for queer people still exists, artificially construed as monstrous when more often than not queer sexuality is steeped in love. In a recent legislative session in New Hampshire, for example, state legislators discussed repealing a law that allows marriage between two people of the same gender. To some of the representatives the notion that there was more than rabid fornication to queer sexuality was utterly foreign and incomprehensible. Representative Nancy Elliot described gay relationships in the language of aberration, saying “We’re talking about taking a penis of one man and putting it in the rectum of another man and wiggling it around in excrement” before claiming that the visceral details, both hilariously and tragically wrong as she got them, were being taught to fifth graders (Brindley). The monstrous rendering of queer sexuality still exists, and is still used to justify the subjugation of queer people to a subordinate, discriminated-against class. We must negotiate a path between the story dominant discourse tells about queer sexuality and its binary opposite in order to assert our fundamental humanity and secure equal protection under the law and equitable treatment by society.

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