Summoning Queer Spirits Through Performance in AIDS Mourning Publics

by

Jayson Abraham Morrison

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Graduate Supervisory Committee:

Tamara Underiner, Chair
Jeff McMahon
Daniel Brouwer

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ABSTRACT

Here I explore three varieties of theatrical responses to the cultural amnesia brought about by what scholars have termed “post-AIDS” rhetoric. Specifically, I examine how AIDS history plays, AIDS comedies, and solo plays provide opportunities for theatregoers to participate in, or reflect on the absence of, what I call “AIDS mourning publics.” I understand these publics to be both the groupings of people that gather around a text, film screening, play performance, or event that was created in response to loss due to AIDS, and the text, screenplay, or play text itself when circulated. In these publics participants work through their grief, make political interventions, and negotiate the meanings of AIDS history for gay men whose sexual awakening occurred before and after the development of protease inhibitors. I join theories of grieving, affect in performance, and the public sphere to study these communal events. I use films, plays, and critical reviews to identify how mourning through performance can be therapeutic for cultural and social actors despite activists' and scholars' sole attention to the counterpublicity of these events. Still, counterpublicity remains an important concern because many in the dominant US public sphere consider AIDS to be a benign “manageable condition” in affluent countries like the US. As such, I also present a dramaturgy of mourning and counterpublicity in twenty-first century US AIDS drama and solo performance with attention focused upon how dramatists and solo performers are inviting spectators to engage with, and find new meaning within, this epidemic. For example, I investigate how pairing mourning with genres like comedy produces political interventions within the space between laughing and astonishment. My dramaturgy of mourning also examines recurring themes such as ghosts, the past, intergenerationalism,

and AIDS amnesia to interpret how performers have framed individual and collective loss to challenge spectators' understanding of AIDS history. To support my claims I use sources from the New York Public Library Manuscripts and Archives Division, gay and lesbian community newspapers, personal interviews, and my own experiences as a spectator viewing productions of *The Normal Heart*, *thirtynothing*, and *The VOID*.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I trace my interest in AIDS related performance back to my experience volunteering at Seattle's AIDS hospice, Bailey-Boushay House in 2001. I was an awkward twenty-three year old just beginning to understand that I was gay and I was eager to connect with the larger gay community outside of my university. Looking back on it, it's odd that my entrée into the broader gay community involved weekly visits with gay and straight people who were gradually dying of AIDS. I still had many AIDS-related fears at the time which makes it stranger to me now. I thank Bill, one of the first residents to truly welcome me after I began volunteering at the hospice. Some of the residents I met there appreciated our chats, whereas others found it a distraction to the other activities they had planned that day. Bill was among the former group and most memorably we chatted about the cocktails he loved, the past outrageous costumes he wore to soirees, and the cute male nurses who attended on him. Bill was an attractive young man, funny, and an easy conversationalist, so I wasn't surprised when I began spending much of my two-hour weekly Bailey-Boushay visits in his room. Regrettably, my university studies intensified and I stopped visiting. On my last trip, not knowing how to say good-bye, I simply pretended I would be back next week. I wish I had the emotional maturity to tell him instead, how pleasant he made my first, nervous foray into the adult gay world. Since I didn't, I'll say here that I thank Bill for his graciousness, and I suspect he probably put me at ease more than I ever comforted him. A classic case of a volunteer being the one to benefit, not the person s/he dedicated time to assist.

I also acknowledge and thank my committee—Professors Tamara Underiner, Dan Brouwer, and Jeff McMahon—for sticking with me and my project throughout this

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PREFACE

"When we let go of the balloons, it's as if we're letting his soul ascend to heaven. It means that we're willing to let go. We're breaking the last earthly ties."

Releasing white helium balloons into the air from New York's Central Park is the last activity of a mid-December memorial Cal Porter organized following the AIDS death of his partner, Andre Gerard. It is the last scene in Terrence McNally's 1990 teleplay, *Andre's Mother*, in which Andre's memorial—nearly five months after his death and Texas hometown burial—is intercut with his mother's flashback memories of her reluctant acquaintance with Cal and the gradual verification of her intuition that Andre is not well. Her homophobia fueled her disapproval of Andre and Cal's relationship, and Andre responded by shielding from her his New York life and subsequent HIV-positive diagnosis and illness. At the memorial, Cal's above instructions to Andre's mother, Katherine, make literal, but not emotional sense. As evidence that we cannot simply "let go" of those we love who die of AIDS, consider that McNally hasn't let go; he used the same characters and story, first in the "Andre's Mother" (1988) scene, then the aforementioned PBS American Playhouse film, and finally, in the 2014 Broadway premiere of *Mothers and Sons*. The latter shifts Andre's death to 1994 and dramatizes a chance encounter between Cal and Katherine 20 years after they parted ways following Andre's memorial.

Upon meeting in *Mothers*, we know that Cal and Katherine let go of their helium balloons years ago, but in many ways they haven't let go of Andre. Both have memories of their life with him, and Cal keeps mementos of their time together. A poster of Andre

performing as Hamlet hangs in the hall, and a box of photos and performance review clippings are kept in spots inauspicious, but accessible enough to share with Katherine upon a moment's notice. Although Cal's recent marriage to Will and their six-year-old son, Bud, makes it appear Cal has "moved on," he hasn't completely, as made clear by Will's bristly behavior around Katherine and his awkward, self-congratulatory remarks about how well he's reacted to Andre's lingering presence in Cal's life. Such remarks and behavior show Will to be jockeying with Andre to win Cal's heart. Katherine's desire to definitively know who transmitted HIV to Andre, her continued disapproval of Andre's relationship with Cal, and her accusation that Andre's "decision" to be gay led to his death indicate she and Andre still have many unresolved issues.

Andre's death represents to both intimates more than the loss of a loved one, as each had dreams of a future that died with Andre too. Cal expresses the regret of dreams dashed when he reflects on the brevity of their six-year relationship: "I wouldn't call 6 years many—not when you plan to spend the rest of your life with someone."[1] Katherine had her own plans for Andre too, but her reactions to his move away from her and Dallas at 18 years old, his gay sexual orientation, his relationship with Cal, and finally his AIDS death increasingly estranged Katherine from her son. She blames Cal and the man who gave him HIV, unable to see how her own homophobia first pushed her son away and squelched her dreams of unconditional love between mother and son.

In this twenty-year case study of the myriad ways the fictional Cal and Katherine grieve(d) and are/were affected by Andre's loss, we see evidence of McNally's view that

[1] Terrence McNally, *Mothers and Sons* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, Inc., 2014) 15.

"AIDS is still a wound in our society that has not completely healed . . . ."[2] McNally's study of grief over time is an excellent preface to my following study of what I call AIDS mourning publics which are theatrical responses to the lingering effects of this wound, which is largely unacknowledged by mainstream culture. The playwrights, screenwriters and activists who conceived the idea for the plays and films examined here do so in response to AIDS losses, much like McNally who wrote six AIDS dramas over a 26 year period, spurred on initially by the 1986 and 1987 AIDS deaths of his "two best friends and dearest collaborators in the theater, Robert Drivas and James Coco."[3] Publicly and performatively responding to this loss—as Cal and Andre's friends do in Central Park when they recite memories of Andre and release balloons symbolizing their lost connection to him—is, in part, an attempt to make such loss and grief matter to an indifferent public. In McNally's decades' long examination of the grief he, Cal, and Katherine experience, he makes a good case for the need to continue making private grief public. In my study, I coin and expand upon a notion of AIDS mourning publics to describe moments when theatrical performance and dramatic texts bring about the possibility of a shared grief that exceeds the purely personal, toward healing that communal wound.

Sharing this grief is complicated by generational differences in the impact of AIDS. Including into the drama the much younger character, Will, allows McNally to trace how AIDS affected these two generations differently. Through their

[2] Terrence McNally and Tyne Daly, interview with Susan Haskins and Michael Riedel, *Theatre Talk*, Theatre Talk Productions and CUNY TV, 12 Apr. 2014.

[3] Terence McNally, *Three Plays by Terence McNally* (New York: Plume, 1990) xi.

intergenerational relationship we observe how memories of Andre and AIDS linger in Cal's mind, which in turn, lead to self-doubt in Will. Through Will spectators see how invisible the AIDS present has become in a "post-AIDS" era in which protease inhibitors and combination therapy drastically reduced AIDS fatalities among those lucky to have access to them. If Cal and Katherine's direct link to Andre allow them to clearly see how his AIDS death influenced their past and affects their present, Will can only see consequences of the AIDS past. In his early thirties and fifteen years younger than late 40s Cal, Will sees the epidemic affecting only Cal and men of his generation. In a terse defense of Cal's loss and a reprimand for blaming him for Andre's death, Will says, "I think people like Cal have been punished enough, Mrs. Gerard. I try to imagine what those years were like for him and Andre but I don't get very far. Maybe I don't want to. The mind shuts down—or the capacity to care. It's one way to deal with it."[4] Will is wise to recognize that "people like Cal" "lost a generation," but his inability to imagine such loss and his understanding that only Cal's generation suffers this loss only amplifies the distance between Will and the many manifestations of this loss. It's an odd sentiment from a man who calls Andre a "ghost" and sees Katherine's surprise visit as confirmation that he was "naïve enough to think I might finally have heard the last of Andre."[5] Will may not personally know anyone who died of AIDS, but AIDS losses have irrevocably affected his relationship to Cal and his life as a gay man. For people who haven't lost loved ones to AIDS, how might performances of AIDS grief motivate them to comprehend how AIDS affects their lives today?

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[4] McNally, *Mothers*, 38.

[5] McNally, *Mothers*, 24.

Will may be unable to express how AIDS losses affect him because his life is the epitome of homonormativity politics which advocate a narrow political agenda of assimilation to mainstream culture. Although Andre's death has a lasting effect on Cal which in turn, affects Cal and Will's marriage, this relationship also shields Will from further exposure to AIDS trauma. Cal's successful career as an investment manager has allowed Will a social and economic status many steps removed from New Yorkers who become HIV-positive today. Such people tend to bear one or all of these characteristics: poor, ethnic minority, a man who has sex with men, drug user, immigrant. Cal and Will's well-appointed Central Park West apartment (with a park view!) serves as the play's setting and makes stark this unstated contrast. Further, as a part-time writer and stay-at-home dad of a six-year-old son, Will's life is dominated with domestic duties that likely leave little time for political causes like direct action AIDS activism or AIDS volunteering which could expose him to the present AIDS realities. For spectators exposed to relative privilege, how might performances of AIDS grief allow them to empathize with the less fortunate?

Cal's understanding of the AIDS and queer past is myopic, so we can only expect a partial history of AIDS through his experiences. Because Katherine was never informed that Andre was dying, Cal offers a brief summary of what life was like for Andre and other gay New Yorkers:

> Something was killing us. Something ugly. Everyone talked about it but no one did anything. …There was so much fear and anger in the face of so much death and no one was helping us. There wasn't time to hate. We learned to help each

other, help each other in ways we never had before. It was the first time I ever felt part of something, a community.[6]

Many gay New Yorkers' experience of the 1980s and early 1990s mirror Cal's, but many other gay New Yorkers can also recall joining direct action and social service activism to do something more than care for a loved one.[7] Thus, Cal's memory that "no one did anything" doesn't match the lived experience of some. Similarly, other gay men might recall the adrenaline rush unleashed from being part of a community after joining the Lavender Hill Mob, the Silence=Death Project, or the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP). Gay men didn't need to experience the threat of death to coalesce as a community, yet it's a popular AIDS narrative that flourishes today. Might performances of AIDS grief allow us to equally honor the experiences of the apolitical and the activist?

Similarities in the AIDS narratives circulated by Will and Cal mean Will's incomplete understanding of the AIDS past can likely be traced back to Cal. For example, both parrot a common narrative that the AIDS deaths of artists are more tragic than others because of their potential missed contributions to the world. [8] McNally might share this view too. It is clear that Cal holds such a view since he seems to cringe whenever he speaks about Andre dying on the cusp of realizing his promise and dream to perform as Hamlet in Central Park's Delacorte Theatre. Similarly, Will conveys a generic variation

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[6] McNally, *Mothers*, 29.

[7] Thankfully Jim Hubbard and Sarah Schulman have interviewed some of these activists and posted their recollections for all to read on the ACT UP Oral History Project website, actuporalhistory.org

[8] For one variation of this narrative see, Michael Feingold, introduction, *The Way We Live Now: American Plays & the AIDS Crisis*, ed. M. Elizabeth Osborn (New York: Theatre Communication Group, 1990) xiii-xiv.

of this narrative when he bemoans to Katherine that Cal "lost a generation. People who might have mattered. Hamlets. Nureyevs. Melvilles and Whitmans. Young men who wanted to write the Great American Novel, too."[9] Privileging artists' deaths is odd because it conflicts with McNally's seeming larger aim: showing the democratizing effect of grief through the perspective of fictional characters and how this grief can linger decades after someone dies. As such, we see through the surrogates of Cal and Katherine that regardless of one's social achievements, his or her AIDS death will still matter and profoundly affect someone.

That such narratives minimize the deaths of millions of non-artists and the grief of millions of bereaved is clearly a problem, but Will's circulation of such ideas is cause for further concern because of his instantaneous defense of Cal's experience and his fear that AIDS history is being erased. Prescient is Will's prediction about "'What Happened to Gay Men in the Final Decades of the 20th Century,' First it will be a chapter in a history book, then a paragraph, then a footnote. People will shake their heads and say, 'What a terrible thing, how sad.' It's already started to happen. I can feel it happening."[10] It isn't that his zeal is misplaced or inappropriate but that the spokesman for transmitting gay AIDS history is someone who has no awareness of the AIDS present and whose knowledge of the AIDS past is pockmarked with gaps. The larger context of McNally's oeuvre, in which all his five AIDS dramas cast white, affluent, cultured gay men (e.g. Cal) as lead characters, further amplifies my fear that it is only the history of such men that Will, and by extension we, care about. As much as I share Will's concern that AIDS

[9] McNally, *Mothers*, 37.

[10] McNally, *Mothers*, 37.

history is being buried, rather than privilege one history over the other, I prefer to transmit—whenever possible—US AIDS histories in the plural.

Because AIDS signifies and is experienced differently whether someone was first affected by AIDS in 1981or more recently, intergenerational spectators gathering for these plays bring with them disparate AIDS experiences. As such, we must attend to how understandings and experiences of AIDS changes over time. In my following study of such plays, I present three case studies which utilize the AIDS past to comment on that past and the AIDS present.

CHAPTER 1

AN INTRODUCTION TO AIDS MOURNING PUBLICS

Visual artist David Wojnarowicz's notorious essay, "Post-Cards from America: X-Rays from Hell," published in the November 1989 *Witnesses: Against our Vanishing* exhibition catalog, was the impetus for the 1992 - 1998 ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) political funerals and "Ashes" actions.[11] Here Wojnarowicz spurred a new adaptation in activist performances of AIDS mourning. Frustrated with more private and apolitical mourning rituals like memorial services, he outlined his dream of dropping the bodies of people felled by AIDS upon the White House steps. He believed that marking the frequency of AIDS deaths in this bold, public way would make us all witnesses to the death and grief that is carefully concealed behind the closed doors of bedrooms, hospital rooms, and places of worship. Hearing Wojnarowicz read his manifesto at New York City's Drawing Center in early 1992, activists within the ACT UP affinity group, Stumpf / Kane were inspired. To make Wojnarowicz's dream a reality, Stumpf / Kane immediately had group discussions, interviewed a funeral director, and conducted other research to plan how to legally and logistically enact political funerals in New York City and Washington D.C.[12]

Exactly one week after Wojnarowicz's July 22, 1992 AIDS related death, Stumpf / Kane and ACT UP followed his exhortations and implemented the political funeral as a

[11] Between the 1992 Wojnarowicz memorial procession and the final ACT UP political funeral—for Steve Michael on June 4, 1998—activists conducted a total of six individual political funerals and two "Ashes Actions" where the cremated remains of people who died from AIDS were tossed over the White House fence. With the exception of the Wojnarowicz procession, AIDS political funerals featured either the corpse or cremated remains of the deceased. For a history of the New York chapter of ACT UP, see chapter 2 in: Jayson Morrison, "Dying for Attention: ACT UP's Confrontational Image, Indeterminate Performance Structure, and their Impact on "Stop the Church," thesis, Ohio State U, 2007.

[12] Joy Episalla, personal interview, 15 Mar. 2011.

new tactic to re-focus public attention on the AIDS epidemic. Over 300 mourners participated in Wojnarowicz's memorial procession through the East Village neighborhood he called home. To publicize the event, mourners carried posters of his artwork and walked behind a large, street wide, black banner that read: DAVID WOJNAROWICZ 1954-1992 DEAD OF AIDS. To audibly mark the event and attract pedestrians' attention as the procession traversed New York City streets, three drummers and mourners carrying pairs of wooden blocks beat their instruments in unison.[13] After stops at places David frequented, the procession ended at Cooper Union, ACT UP's weekly meeting location, with an outdoor slideshow that included a photo of the White House sandwiched between excerpts from David's aforementioned essay. David's friend, Dirk Roundtree, also read portions of the essay to emphasize David's plea to make AIDS grief public. Following this, the mourners embraced each other and burnt all the physical evidence of that day in a funeral pyre in the middle of the street. Learning about this and other political funerals sparked my interest in what I call "AIDS mourning publics."

AIDS MOURNING PUBLICS DEFINED

For my purposes, both Wojnarowicz's essay and his memorial procession are examples of AIDS mourning publics. More specifically, they are "counterpublics," given Wojnarowicz's stated opposition to the state and Catholic Church. As Rita Felski aptly described it, a "counter-public sphere as a discursive arena used by groups oppressed or

[13] Guy Trebay, "City of Widows," *Village Voice* 11 Aug. 1992: 14.

discriminated against within the dominant public sphere.[14] Later scholars see the effects of oppression and discrimination more concretely in the group's lack of political power and "exclusion from prominent channels of political discourse."[15] This generative reformulation of Jürgen Habermas's concept of a single "bourgeois public sphere" allows scholars to write concretely about how marginalized groups also form publics to rationally debate topics of mutual concern, and then relay any claims or grievances to the dominant public sphere in order to influence public opinion. Such alliances produce "counterpublicity" that can take the form of editorials, essays, novels, speeches, internet blogs, political demonstrations, posters, theatre performances, films, and other forms of discourse. Representational and political interventions are often the purpose of this counterpublicity. That scholars like Felski—operating from a history-from-below approach—identified proletarian and feminist publics operating "invisibly" in the midst of Habermas's single, bourgeois public sphere provides inspiration that I might also "make visible" AIDS mourning publics which struggle for visibility within the dominant public today. My hope is that a historical and dramaturgical analysis of past AIDS mourning publics might offer us ways to broaden the reach and influence of today's AIDS mourning publics.

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[14] Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989) 166. The idea of a public in opposition to Jürgen Habermas's bourgeois public sphere can be traced back to Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge's *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, 1972, Trans. Peter Labananyi et al. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993). For a history of the concept's uptake in English language scholarship see Frank Farmer, *After the Public Turn: Composition, Counterpublics, and the Citizen Bricoleur* (Logan: Utah S UP, 2013) 111-115.

[15] Robert Asen and Daniel C. Brouwer, introduction, *Counterpublics and the State*, ed. Asen and Brouwer (Albany: State U of NY P, 2001) 2-3.

The core of AIDS mourning publics is a text created in response to AIDS losses, and the manifesto, screenplay, play script, or essay engenders an AIDS mourning public when it is circulated among separate people or, when the text is realized as a play performance, film screening or other event attended by an audience.[16] Michael Warner's argument in favor of *circulating* texts as the inspiration for a public's instantiation underscores how such publics must continue beyond the premiere of a play or manifesto reading, for example. This understanding creates a more concrete understanding of a public's participants—an aim of Warner's—and places such publics within the context of time. This is particularly useful for my project in which activists take up past AIDS texts and use them for new ends in social and political contexts which differ remarkably from the author's.

When discussing twenty-first century AIDS mourning publics, I don't characterize them as counterpublics because of the changed sociopolitical context of the US AIDS epidemic today. For instance, in the US the sense of crisis regarding AIDS is much diminished, and the enemies of AIDS activists are diffused, not crystallized into identifiable and assailable enemies (e.g. George H.W. Bush or Cardinal John O'Connor). More importantly, the audience for AIDS mourning publics' counterpublicity is often gay and AIDS communities themselves.

In creating the term "AIDS mourning publics," I yoke to public sphere theories emerging scholarly understandings of affect to focus upon how artists and performers use performance to work through their grief, attempt political interventions, challenge the

[16] My understanding of circulating texts as publics is inspired by Michael Warner. See Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002) 65 -66.

meanings of AIDS for gay men and the broader US culture, and modulate and project gay and AIDS identities. A broad agenda is possible because AIDS losses extend beyond the loss of specific individuals to broader sociocultural losses: gay sexual culture, sex without the risk of death, an anti-assimilation queer cultural ethos, and a queer cultural genealogy. New ways of thinking about collective mourning allow me to explore these literal and figurative losses and account for the seeming invisibility of AIDS mourning publics today. My understanding that such interventions are possible in AIDS mourning publics mirrors Judith Butler's description of mourning as a time for reflection upon one's loss and ongoing vulnerability in addition to collective transformations necessary to mitigate future losses. That is, mourning becomes a time for us to re-envision ourselves and our communities.

When discussing loss, many scholars conflate mourning and grief as seen in landmark texts about grief such as Sigmund Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia;" Douglas Crimp's "Mourning and Militancy;" and Judith Butler's *Precarious Life: the Powers of Mourning and Violence.* To be more precise, I use in this dissertation the distinction between mourning and grief made by psychologists Margaret S. Stroebe, Robert O. Hansson, Henk Schut, and Wolfgang Stroebe. According to Stroebe et. al, "*Grief* is the term applied to the primarily emotional (affective) reaction to the loss of a loved one through death."[17] Grief is not an individual emotion, but a syndrome or state where many emotions—depressed mood, yearning, despair, loneliness, a sense of ongoing communication with the deceased, anger, and laughter—can be felt and

[17] Margaret S Stroebe et al., "Bereavement Research: Contemporary Perspectives," *Handbook of Bereavement Research and Practice: Advances in Theory and Intervention*, eds. Margaret S. Strobe et al. (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2008) 5.

expressed. Since the experience of grief varies individually, culturally, and temporally, it's not possible to offer a narrow set of grief characteristics or symptoms. More simply, grief is identified not by its effects, but by its cause: loss. If grief can comprise any emotional reaction to loss, mourning refers "to the public display of grief, the social expressions or acts expressive of grief that are shaped by the (often religious) beliefs and practices of a given society or cultural group."[18] Think special garments (usually black in the US), social and leisure time restrictions, and ritualistic—often culturally expected—memorial practices which all communicate to others that one is grieving.

Given that mourning is "the *public* display of grief," my coining the term "AIDS mourning publics" may appear redundant at first blush.[19] In underscoring the publicness of these events, I invoke their relation to the public sphere which one enters to air grievances and influence public opinion—unlike traditional mourning practices, which serve to validate grief or legitimize familial relationships. The particular mourning practices used—and why—continue to be contentious issues debated in AIDS mourning publics. Thus, raising these issues in such venues is a form of inward address to influence the views of AIDS activists too. Emphasizing these events' publicness also allows me to draw attention to the challenges inherent in transgressing the many US cultural barriers which confine to the private sphere, grief generally, and AIDS grief particularly. Some of the general barriers to mourning in the US—the rise of the funeral director, the

[18] Stroebe et al., 5.

[19] Combining these terms is not without precedent. "The new public mourning," according to Tony Walter, is when people publicize their grief at roadside shrines, or mourn the deaths of celebrities and high profile tragedies even though they lack a personal or intimate connection with the deceased. See Tony Walter, "The New Public Mourning," *Handbook of Bereavement Research and Practice*, ed. Margaret S. Stroebe, et al. (Washington DC: American Psychological Association, 2008) 245.

commercialization of death rituals, and changes in funeral services—are discussed below. AIDS paranoia created barriers to seeking validation of AIDS grief publicly as did the societal marginalization of the people initially infected in the US—gay men, IV drug users, and ethnic minorities—who were considered abject in US culture. The "general public's" low regard for same-sex relationships and internalized homophobia further stymie "going public" with mourning for gay men and lesbians.[20] Mourning events like early 1980s candlelight vigils and the 1987 unveiling of the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt show evidence of these stigmas because the AIDS dead were sometimes represented in public as numbers or by their first names only.[21] Another manifestation of AIDS stigma: obituaries in which an AIDS death is intentionally listed inaccurately as a heart attack or pneumonia. Veiling the identities of AIDS losses in these ways is ostensibly meant to protect the reputations of the deceased, but more significantly, these death cover stories make anonymous the bereaved. Reminding readers of the publicness of these events by calling them "AIDS mourning publics" is also meant to honor the courage of those willing to publicly share their grief in spite of such mourning barriers.

AIDS grief remains privatized in the US despite the many efforts to publicize it via candlelight vigils, AIDS walks, and AIDS mourning publics like the AIDS Quilt, performances of AIDS plays, and ACT UP political funerals. The "normalization" of AIDS after the 1996 approval of protease inhibitors and combination therapy—described

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[20] Jan Zita Grover critiques the intent and reception of terms such as "general public" and "general population" in "AIDS Keywords," *October* (Winter 1987): 23-24. According to Grover, these terms falsely placate the HIV infection fears of heterosexual, non-intravenous drug using people and further stigmatize and exclude members of "high risk groups"—like gay men and IV drug users—from this imaginary public.

[21] David Román, *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture and AIDS* (Bloomington: Indiana U P, 1997) 26-38 ; Cindy Ruskin, *The Quilt: Stories from the NAMES Project* (New York: Pocket Books, 1988) 146-155.

in detail below—provided new obstacles for publicly sharing AIDS grief. As such, “AIDS mourning publics” continues to be a useful term to describe activists’ efforts to make political interventions while mourning AIDS losses.

THE US AIDS DEATH SCENARIO

Making the dead AIDS body or its remains a magnet for political funeral spectators’ attention was in concert with AIDS activists’ then decade-long battle to focus public attention upon AIDS and the material effects of this epidemic. Similar aims can be seen in plays and musicals such as *As Is* (1985), *The Lisbon Traviata* (1985), *The Normal Heart* (1985), *Angels in America* (1991), *The Baltimore Waltz* (1992), *Rent* (1996), and *Mothers and Sons* (2014). Activists’ (I consider stage artists within this category) efforts to humanize people with AIDS, speed the development of HIV medications, make health insurance available to all, and a host of other political aims understandably foregrounded the experiences and uncertain mortal fate of HIV-positive people.

As AIDS street activists more specifically strove towards these pursuits, AIDS activist and scholar Douglas Crimp noted that some tended to ignore or bottle emotions of grief and sorrow to save time and energy for political aims. Political funerals are unique in that activists focus upon the emotional toll of friends and loved ones’ deaths by baring their feelings of grief (anger bewilderment, sorrow and other emotions) for strangers to view. More importantly, as the bereaved parade the exposed, diseased and dead bodies of their comrades through the streets, it is the loss that *mourners*—friends, caregivers, partners, and family—incur that draws spectators’ attention. Thus, political funerals and AIDS mourning publics more generally present us with rare looks at

bereaved activists and cultural workers working through their grief in the midst of harnessing and performing emotions of grief for political purposes. Through exploring how activists coupled activism and mourning through the creation and performance of AIDS plays we can contribute to performance studies' emerging understanding of loss as performance and how that experience may be fruitful for the social actor.

Wojnarowicz's interest in dropping dead AIDS bodies at the steps of the White House may shock readers familiar with the traditional scenario or script of death and mourning, where mourners have their loved one embalmed so all can gather around their body to cry, laugh, and share memories before the body is cremated or interred six feet below ground. AIDS altered this death script or scenario because an overwhelming number of those felled by AIDS were not septuagenarians but young men and women in their twenties and thirties. The frequency with which this scenario was embodied led to comparisons to a nightly bombed war zone. This massive death scale represented another alteration in the scenario of death and mourning.

Implicit in Wojnarowicz's complaint that the same actors often enacted this AIDS death scenario is a concern that funeral speeches might become so well-rehearsed and frequently delivered that AIDS mourning practices become formulaic and unremarkable to the participants themselves. His description of memorials for people with AIDS having less influence on society than a commercial for handi-wipes also illustrates the waning influence of mourning publics in 1989. Thus, Wojnarowicz's decision to make private grief public in the form of political funerals constitutes an important intervention in the AIDS death and mourning scenario. In striving to make mourning publics remarkable, he is forcing a broader public to become spectators or witnesses to the reality

of AIDS. This impulse can also be found among current activists and performers who seek to create similar alterations to the AIDS death and mourning script.

Stage plays such as Paula Vogel's farce *Baltimore Waltz* (1992) also produce adjustments in the AIDS death and mourning scenario to encourage spectators to reconsider their understanding of the AIDS epidemic, its effect on individuals' lives, and how best to react to AIDS grief. Despite popular belief that mourning and humor do not coexist, Vogel uses humor as both a defense mechanism after the 1988 death of her brother Carl and a way to illustrate the absurdities of HIV infection and individuals' desperate will to survive.

As the now thirty-four year old epidemic continues, new ways to alter the AIDS mourning script and to performatively frame the attendant death and loss of AIDS—like Wojnarowicz's political funeral or Paula Vogel's *Baltimore Waltz*—are urgently needed. A full chronological account of theatrical and filmic responses to AIDS would reveal as many failures as successes in this regard, and other scholars have already begun to trace such histories.[22] Here, I suggest a historical and dramaturgical analysis of select AIDS plays and films may uncover how AIDS activists successfully made the death and loss of AIDS visible in the past. This knowledge might assist activists on stage as they seek to puncture what David Román calls the "end-of-AIDS rhetoric" wherein AIDS is imagined to be "cured" so long as one has access to and takes highly expensive and toxic medications.[23]

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[22] For such histories see Román, *Acts*, and Roger Hallas, *Reframing Bodies: AIDS, Bearing Witness, and the Queer Moving Image* (Durham: Duke UP, 2009).

[23] David Román, *Performance in America: Contemporary U.S. Culture and the Performing Arts* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2005) 52.

All of the above considerations contribute to my research question:

How have performing artists' participation in AIDS mourning publics allowed them to work through their loss, and how have they framed this loss to challenge spectators' understanding of AIDS and AIDS history?

THE INTERSECTION OF AIDS GRIEF IN US MOURNING PRACTICES

Anecdotal studies of grief and loss—such as Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" and Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's *On Death and Dying* (1969) have had a lasting impact on our understanding of grief and loss in the US, even after empirical research has challenged some of their assumptions. Both Freud and Kübler-Ross described grieving as a process that happens in stages; Freud identified three stages (reality testing, break from reality, return to reality), and Kübler-Ross proposed five stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance). Recent empirical research has confirmed their understanding that one experiences grief in stages, but scientists have unseated their assumption—whether stated or implied—that grief has an end point.[24] Freud proposed grief ended after one reached his final stage, and grief ceases after Kübler-Ross's fifth stage (acceptance) according to popular knowledge, influenced perhaps by the linear progression of the stages and the seeming finality that "acceptance" connotes. Despite Kübler-Ross's many attempts to convince others that grief can be endless, the misinterpretation of her theory persists as seen in "One Fish, Two Fish, Blowfish, Blue

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[24] Paul K. Maciejewski et al., "An Empirical Examination of the Stage Theory," *Journal of American Medical Association* 297.7 (2007): 716-23.

Fish," a 1991 episode of US popular knowledge indicator, *The Simpsons*.[25] In the episode Homer rushes through each of the five stages in seconds after dining on a presumably poisonous fish and hearing his doctor's deadly diagnosis. Unlike Homer, most bereaved take at least six months to accept the new normal that a loss presents, but grief never wanes for others.[26] Acknowledging that grief can be endless is important for my study of AIDS mourning publics because it helps explain why people such as Larry Kramer and Terrence McNally continue to mourn 20-30 year old AIDS losses.

Mourning AIDS losses has not been a simple or easy task for many bereaved. Many have already written about the paranoia that accompanied the HIV epidemic and how it affected the survivors of people with AIDS before the discovery of protease inhibitors. For instance, as depicted in *The Normal Heart* (discussed in full in Chapter 3) the bereaved sometimes encountered hospital staff afraid to touch or examine their loved ones after he or she died, and finding a funeral home willing to embalm or cremate their bodies was sometimes difficult. Gay and lesbian people in closeted relationships faced additional obstacles when mourning. In such circumstances, the surviving partner may not have been able to care for their dying loved one, or participate fully in the planning and execution of their funeral. Also, he or she may not have even been allowed or invited to attend death rituals performed by the deceased's biological family. Social sympathy, bereavement time at work, and fewer social responsibilities could also be withheld from those in closeted relationships. Even when a pair's relationship was public,

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[25] For example, Kübler-Ross reiterates in her last book, "Acceptance is a process that we experience, not a final stage with an end point." See Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2005) 27.

[26] George A. Bonanno et al., "Resilience to Loss and Chronic Grief: A Prospective Study from Preloss to 18-Months Postloss," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 83.5 (2002): 1150-1164.

their relationships lacked legal standing until the development of civil unions and same sex marriage, so all medical and burial decisions could still be made by the legal next of kin without the consent, input, or participation of the grieving partner. Without a legally recognized relationship, the bereaved may also suffer legal and financial problems relating to inheritance, ownership of property, and lease transfers. Other societal institutions—like mainstream newspapers—also failed to recognize gay and lesbian mourning. For example, the *New York Times* did not permit publishing a "companion's" name in the deceased's obituary until 1986.[27] Each of these different circumstances can produce in the bereaved what Kenneth J. Doka calls "disenfranchised grief," or "grief that results when a person experiences a significant loss and the resulting grief is not openly acknowledged, socially validated, or publicly mourned. In short, although the individual is experiencing a grief reaction, there is no social recognition that the person has a right to grieve or a claim for social sympathy or support."[28]

Homophobia and fears of discrimination if one's homosexuality were publicly revealed aren't the only reasons mourning was difficult for many gay and lesbian people. Throughout much of the twentieth century, most Americans viewed death as a taboo topic. This view has been advanced in a plethora of books including: Geoffrey Gorer's *Death, Grief and Mourning* (1965); Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's *On Death and* Dying (1969); Philippe Ariès's *Western Attitudes Toward Death* (1974) and *The Hour of Death* (1981); Jessica Mitford's *The American Way of Death Revisited* (1997); and Ruth

[27] See: David Gere, *How to Make Dances in an Epidemic: Tracking Choreography in the Age of AIDS*. (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2007) 293.

[28] Kenneth J. Doka, "Disenfranchised Grief in Historical and Cultural Perspective," *Handbook of Bereavement Research and Practice*, ed. Margaret S. Stroebe, et al. (Washington DC: American Psychological Association, 2008) 224.

Konigsberg's *The Truth about Grief* (2011). These scholars offer many theories to explain the shift to the privatization, or waning of mourning practices. Geoffrey Gorer, for instance, speculates that the deaths of a massive number of soldiers and citizens during WW I made people dread and curtail mourning rituals.[29] Gorer explains many didn't have the time to continually mourn, and others became increasingly concerned about how mourning affected others. In a twist on Herbert Blumer's theory that emotions spread between people like communicable disease, Gorer surmised some hid their grief because they didn't want to further depress anyone, especially traumatized soldiers returning home. Still others abstained from mourning because they didn't want their grief to stimulate opposition to the war.

Changes in how and who cared for the deceased also fueled the privatization of mourning. According to US historian James J. Farrell, the rise and professionalization of the funeral director and concomitant commercialization of death rituals and products resulted in the bereaved performing fewer mourning rituals and becoming passive, consumer spectators in funeral ceremonies dominated by funeral directors.[30] In contrast, before 1880, the deceased was washed, dressed in a winding sheet or shroud, and further prepared for burial by a female family member, friend or neighbor. A minister oversaw the funeral services which ended with mourners viewing the body in open air to ventilate any bodily smells.[31] Before 1880 in the US, embalming bodies was rarely performed and viewed as "an exotic custom of ancient Egyptians," but it gradually became a standard

[29] Geoffrey Gorer, *Death, Grief, and Mourning* (New York: Doubleday, 1965) xxii.

[30] James J. Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death, 1830-1920* (Philadelphia, Temple U P, 1980) 179.

[31] Farrell, 147.

practice in Northern US funeral preparations by 1920, permitting the rise of the funeral director.[32]

Modifications in chapel architecture and funeral services also further restricted mourning opportunities. In some chapels bereaved family members view the service from private rooms so their grief is shielded from the larger, public assembly. During 1850-1920 shorter, less solemn services were gradually instituted in the US to shelter the bereaved from grief pangs and to accommodate a new, religious understanding of death as an occasion for joy, not grief.[33] Services were also increasingly structured in a way that allows mourners to manage or conceal their public display of emotions. For example, after reminiscences of the deceased are offered by those gathered, clergy might have prayers so that the bereaved can recollect themselves and stave off tears while heads are bowed.[34] Each innovation may seem well-intentioned, but fettering the grief and making the bereaved self-conscious when mourning is a possible effect of these changes.

In memorials, candlelight vigils, play performances, the Names Project AIDS Quilt, and other AIDS mourning publics, people with AIDS and their loved ones developed ways to publicly grieve AIDS losses in spite of the privatization of mourning in the US generally, and more specifically for queers and people with AIDS. Fundraisers, memorials, and candlelight vigils were the earliest performances of mourning according to David Román in his landmark historiography of early AIDS performances, *Acts of*

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[32] Farrell, 157.

[33] Farrell, 178.

[34] Jenny Hockey, "The Acceptable Face of Human Grieving? The Clergy's Role in Managing Emotional Expression During Funerals," *The Sociology of Death: Theory, Culture, Practice,* ed. David Clark (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993) 141.

Intervention. Memorials and candlelight vigils—many created and hosted by screenwriters, deejays, actors and other artists—permitted mourning while also accomplishing other aims like providing AIDS educational outreach, demanding the US government increase AIDS funding, and humanizing people with AIDS. The linkage between theatre and AIDS deepens with time to the advantage of AIDS activists. According to Román, identity-based gay and lesbian theaters that emerged in the 1960s and '70s to challenge stereotypical representations of gay life were flourishing at the outset of the AIDS epidemic in 1981. Thus, they had the means and knowledge to intervene in how AIDS was being represented. Although the earliest "acts of intervention" were staged in gay and lesbian bars and gay leisure destinations like New York's Fire Island, the address of such interventions broadened in time. For instance, William Hoffman's *As Is* (1985) reached a mainstream audience as the first Broadway AIDS play.

It is incorrect to assume that the relatively rapid adoption of collective mourning rituals was because gay men, lesbians, and people with AIDS were unaffected by the privatization of mourning present within 1980s US culture more generally. Mourning for gay communities became further complicated by gay scholars and activists criticism of mourning's effects. Playwright and activist Larry Kramer failed to see how "ghoulish" and "morbid activities" like candlelight marches could have any political effect other than offer the gay community a modest amount of dignity before television cameras.[35] Even mourning under these circumstances could have disastrous effects, according to scholar Jeff Nunokawa, if AIDS deaths were not depicted within the context of political and

[35] Larry Kramer, *Reports from the Holocaust* (New York: St Martin's P, 1989) 264.

public health policy failures. Without this context Nunokawa feared such events would only perpetuate a cultural rumor—popular in mainstream and gay media—that "gay men are fated to die early" or that they are "doomed to extinction anyway."[36]

Douglas Crimp's "Mourning and Militancy" was his attempt to explain activists' antagonism to mourning and describe how avoiding mourning may jeopardize the health and lives of activists. Ultimately Crimp proposes that activists attend to their grief and vulnerability to loss by complementing their activism with greater attention to their emotional and physical needs. What he calls for: "Militancy, of course, then, but mourning too: mourning and militancy."[37] As I've described elsewhere, some activists designed actions which unwittingly heeded this call, but that was rare.[38] It was more common for them to report mourning only after leaving activism. In both Ann Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feelings* (2003) and Debra Gould's *Moving Politics* (2009) the authors describe how former activists suppressed mourning while activists, but then attended to their grief upon leaving AIDS activism. ACT UP activist Joy Episalla describes a familiar refrain: the quick succession of friends' deaths left no time to mourn:

> I would tend to think that most people—especially for the people in The Marys [an ACT UP affinity group Episalla helped create]—it has probably taken all of these years to actually mourn because there wasn't time to mourn. There was only time to react to what was going on. If you look at the time period between [my

[36] Jeff Nunokawa, "'All the Sad Young Men': AIDS and the Work of Mourning," *Inside / Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (London: Routledge, 1991) 312.

[37] Douglas Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy," *October* 51 (1990): 3-18.

[38] Jayson Morrison, "Going Public with Grief: Coupling Mourning with Militancy," *Public Theatres and Theatre Publics*, ed. Robert Shimko and Sara Freeman (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012) 106 - 117.

> friends'] Mark [Lowe Fisher], Tim [Bailey], and Jon [Greenberg's] deaths, it's an incredibly short period. Mark dies 92 November, Tim dies the 29th of June [1993]—he died on a Monday—and Jon died two weeks later [July 12, 1993]. You got to wind it up again? You're already so wound. You can't fucking believe that this is happening.[39]

People continued to grieve in spite of activists' concerns about the effects of mourning, or whether they had adequate time to mourn *each* death of a friend or loved one. But, with the activists' emphasis upon confrontational politics and anger (an expression of grief), also comes communal pressure to submerge other feelings of grief and avoid non-confrontational mourning practices. For example, ACT UP member Bob Rafsky famously said he would like to piss on the AIDS Quilt and he urged others to avoid similarly feel-good "easy, symbolic embodiments of our grief" such as candlelight vigils and AIDS walks.[40] Likewise, mourners report others policing their expressions of grief. Below, ACT UP member David Robinson recalls such an experience at a 1992 San Francisco candlelight vigil where he was mourning the AIDS death of his partner, Warren:

> Warren had just died very recently and my grief was as raw as I think it ever got and I was with some close friends and yeah I was crying and then at some point I just started wailing—it was just the most intense expression of grief I have ever and probably ever will experience. There were some people, not a lot, but some

[39] Joy Episalla, personal interview, 15 March 2011.

[40] Robert Rafsky, "I'm Not Dying Anymore," *QW* 12 July 1992: 51.

people around me, I remember one guy in particular who tried to discourage that and one man who said, "You should do that at home," as if that, you know, I had crossed the line that there were acceptable ways to show one's grief and unacceptable ways and some should be kept private and some public.[41]

Understanding gay men's past fraught relationship to grief and mourning is essential to my study of AIDS mourning publics because the "disenfranchised grief" and mourning barriers experienced by AIDS survivors of the 1980s and 1990s affects how they participate in AIDS mourning publics today. Likewise, younger gay men experience mourning barriers too, but they come in the form of barriers discussed below: the AIDS generation gap and the invisibility of AIDS.

PERFORMANCE AND MOURNING

Only within the last two decades have performance or theatre studies scholars begun to seriously study the effects of affect on both actors and spectators during performance. This is not surprising considering that foundational Western texts, such as Plato's *Republic*, describe the expression of feelings as a threat to reason and something "any one of us would abominate and be ashamed of in his own person."[42] This aversion to emotion can be seen in popular theatre theorists such as Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal. Brecht's epic or dialectic theatre modeled Plato's belief that poets must encourage their

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[41] David Robinson, telephone interview, 27 May 2009.

[42] Plato, "The Republic," Trans. Benjamin Jowett, *The Internet Classics Archive*, Daniel C. Stevenson, Web Atomics, 2000, Web, 15 Sept. 2008, Book X.

spectators to keep unruly emotions at bay to prevent interference with thought. Likewise, Boal's diminished view of affect led him to privilege physical oppressions over emotional oppressions before an epiphany that led to his development of the Rainbow of Desire, a system of exercises meant to interrupt and explode the effects of mental oppressions on an individual's mind and body.

This aversion to emotion can be seen in the working conditions of some of the activist groups and scholarly accounts of their efforts described later. For example, in Douglas Crimp's germinal *Mourning and Militancy* (1989) he explores a popular opinion among AIDS activists that the late 1980s and early 1990s were a time to "act up," not mourn, where action was privileged over affect. Crimp believes some AIDS activists think mourning accomplishes little and fear that if one were to mourn each friend, partner, or family member who died during a time of never-ending loss, one would be too overwhelmed to do anything else. Although Crimp's aim is to encourage activists to incorporate mourning into their militancy and therefore explode the mourning / militancy binary, his intervention had limited success according to Ann Cvetkovich and Deborah Gould's more recent analyses of the emotional culture of AIDS activists.

Plato's thesis is also a likely influence upon early scholars of "collective behavior," or what is now known as social movement studies. Theorists such as Herbert Blumer believed emotions spread through crowds like communicable disease, preventing rational thought and leading to a group-think mentality. Since these early collective behavior theorists believed in democratic politics, where everyone has equal access to institutional politics like the legislative and judicial branches, participants who chose other ways to advance their grievances were believed to be psychologically incomplete

and prone to violence or latent homosexuality.[43] Beginning in the 1960s with Resource Mobilization or Political Process Theory, theorists began to understand that social movement participants were rational and balanced individuals. However in this cognition shift, theorists pushed against earlier collective behavior theories so hard that the emotions of participants were not considered—the divide between affect and cognition continued, but in a different form. It is not until what Deborah Gould calls “the emotional turn” that social movement scholars began to understand that emotion and cognition are inseparable. This turn can be seen within the smattering of academic essays throughout the 1990s. According to Gould, a hard crank in this turn occurred in 1999 with a New York University conference on emotion and social movements that culminated in Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta’s *Passionate Politics*, a collection of essays from this conference.

In spite of this historical opposition to emotion, performance, with its emphasis on rehearsal, revision, improvisation, play, and repetition appears to be an ideal method for enacting grief and a metaphor for how the grieving process may be facilitated through mourning. In Peggy Phelan’s *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories*, she explains that the end result of performance, particularly its ephemerality, makes performance an especially generative perspective useful for studying other losses. . Similarly, in Jodi Kanter’s *Performing Loss: Rebuilding Community through Theater and Writing* she agrees that “loss as performance” is an appropriate metaphor. In the case of Kanter, however, her data and analysis focuses on the writer, and she largely ignores the process

[43] Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jasper, and Francesca Polletta, introduction, *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements*, ed. Jeff Goodwin et al. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2002) 2-3.

of performance or the embodied experience of the performer.[44] Her data includes texts about loss, reflections upon adapting (through condensing and cutting) literature for the stage, and creating performances with loss as a subject. In "Brother's Keepers, or, The Performance of Mourning," Peter Dickinson considers how artists such as Paula Vogel and Margie Gillis created theatre and dance performances that share the artists' grief with spectators, however, he also ignores the act of performing in favor of an analysis of the effects such performances have on spectators. During performances, Dickinson believes spectators reflect on the loss of the protagonist and naturally develop an empathetic identification with the mourner that will result in unspecified political action. My interviews with theatre artists, close readings of AIDS dramas, and reflections upon my viewings of AIDS performances, allow me to consider more broadly how both playwrights and spectators reflect upon and work through their own respective griefs in public. Reflections upon the loss of the protagonist is simply a means to consider other losses.

AN ARGUMENT FOR THE UTILITY OF AIDS MOURNING PUBLICS TODAY

It is necessary that we expand the reach of AIDS mourning publics today because some within the gay and lesbian community—a longtime proponent of AIDS activism—appear to have distanced themselves from the epidemic. Douglas Crimp positions this turn beginning in 1989 as a reaction to much loss and death and sees the turn sharpening later, as gay and lesbian activists' attention is pulled to new aims like allowing gay and lesbian

[44] Jodi Kanter, *Performing Loss: Rebuilding Community through Theater and Writing* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois U P, 2007) 6.

people to serve within the US armed forces and to legally marry in the US.[45] US cultural historian Lisa Duggan sees this shift as evidence of a politics of "homonormativity" within the gay and lesbian community, where public discussions about sex, AIDS, and non-assimilation-minded queers are avoided.[46] This distancing trend becomes more pronounced with the introduction of protease inhibitors in 1996 and gay and mainstream journalists' subsequent parroting of "end-of-AIDS" rhetoric.[47] Emblematic of this rhetoric is Andrew Sullivan's "When Plagues End: Notes on the Twilight of an Epidemic," where he forecasts the FDA approval of protease inhibitors will lead to "the ebbing of AIDS" when HIV infection "no longer signifies death. It merely signifies illness."[48] Underneath Sullivan's and others' marvel of protease inhibitors is a renewed faith in AIDS treatment research and an understanding that the medical and pharmaceutical establishment—not AIDS activists—are responsible for this advancement.[49] This rhetoric also hails from a privileged social position as only a tiny population of HIV-positive people in the US and across the world can access this "post AIDS" era; the majority of HIV-positive people are out of luck because they either have late stage AIDS and cannot tolerate the medications or lack the necessary healthcare and insurance needed to afford and use them.

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[45] Tina Takemoto, "The Melancholia of AIDS: Interview with Douglas Crimp," *Art Journal* 62.4 (2003): 88-89.

[46] Lisa Duggan, "The New Homonormativity: the Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism," *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics,* ed. Russ Castronovo and Dana Nelson (Durham: Duke U P, 2002) 175-194.

[47] Román, *Performance*, 52.

[48] Andrew Sullivan, "When Plagues End: Notes on the Twilight of an Epidemic," *New York Times Magazine* 10 Nov. 1996: 54.

[49] Sullivan, 58.

Many scholars have argued that the rise of "homonormativity" politics, combined with the introduction of protease inhibitors, has made AIDS "invisible" within both the US gay and mainstream cultures. In turn, scholars such as Claire Decoteau have explored how the invisibility of AIDS has affected mainstream perceptions of the lived experiences of HIV-positive people in the US. Decoteau argues that within the US public sphere "AIDS signification is frozen in time" so that markers of AIDS from 1981-1996, such as emaciated bodies or Kaposi sarcoma lesions, still signify AIDS even within the US.[50] Thus, US audiences are "haunted" or "spooked" when US Americans with AIDS publicly show the material effects of AIDS upon their body or discuss the hardships they continue to face.[51] In addition to explaining how people with AIDS in the US are ghosted as a result of their invisibility, Decoteau's metaphor of ghosting is used to understand how "hauntings" by testimonial activists might force their spectators to acknowledge and reckon with stereotypes of HIV/AIDS, particularly about the supposed "end-of-AIDS" within the developed world. Similarly, my project is designed to uncover how playwrights and directors of films and plays might make the most political use of their "hauntings."

Specifically, in Chapter 3 ("Conjuring and Reframing AIDS Ghosts in Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* on Broadway"), I consider the political effects when playwrights and performers conjure the ghosts of past mourning publics and assume they can still speak to mourning publics today. Traditional or solo documentary AIDS plays have the potential to make visible to younger spectators AIDS ghost stories about the

[50] Claire Laurier Decoteau, "The Specter of AIDS: Testimonial Activism in the Aftermath of the Epidemic," *Sociological Theory* 26.3 (2008): 241.

[51] Decoteau, 232.

AIDS past which have been disavowed or repressed by the dominant culture. Spectators' surprised or astonished reactions to unearthing these AIDS memories is due to a doubly uncanny effect when the issues or concerns are identical or similar to ones still faced by people today. Producers of the 2011 Broadway revival of Larry Kramer's fictionalized documentary, *The Normal Heart*, wanted to educate spectators about the AIDS past, but they did a poor job connecting such memories to the current struggles of people with AIDS. Further, in framing the play around marriage equality they further repressed doubly uncanny stories like the unsettled debate about gay sexual norms.

As AIDS has become culturally "invisible," so has knowledge of early AIDS activists' work to force the government to respond to the epidemic. Artists have sought to counter this erasure or invisibility through the collection of AIDS activists' oral histories in the ACT UP Oral History Project (actuporalhistory.org) and retrospective narratives of this time in films such as *We Were Here* (2011), *How to Survive a Plague* (2012), and *United in Anger: a History of ACT UP* (2012). This relatively large number of films and archival projects may appear to contradict scholars' charges of AIDS invisibility, but we must remember that these are all retrospective narratives that use the voices and lives of now middle aged and older men and women to tell us what AIDS was like in the eighties and early nineties. Any reference to the present state of AIDS in the US is so brief and fleeting that these narratives unwittingly reinforce AIDS invisibility rhetoric.

Conversely, new solo plays such as Dan Fishback's *thirtynothing* (2011) and Adam Pinti's *The VOID* (2011) investigate this past not to preserve it, but in order to explore the imprint this past has on the *present*. In Chapter 2 ("Using the US AIDS

Archive and Repertoire in Dan Fishback's *thirtynothing* to Locate "creative rebellious gay boys.'"), I explore how digging up and (present)ing the past within mourning publics might be revelatory for young gay people, but also might have political uses as spectators are invited to reflect on their awareness of their inherited AIDS past. In examining Dan Fishback's solo play, I also consider how performers in their late twenties and early thirties are chronicling their contemporary experience with AIDS and breaking through AIDS invisibility within their own generation. Specifically, Fishback uses reminiscence as testament to the epidemic's impact upon the lives of gay men whose sexual maturity occurs after the protease inhibitor combination therapy breakthrough. Surprisingly, some of the epidemic's effects are formative because he identifies inspiring, revolutionary moments and figures from US AIDS history and uncovers a gay lineage to place himself within. The performances move beyond self-absorption because the reminiscences and selected US AIDS history moments, I argue, are also used to create Bakhtinian centrifugal tendencies to draw spectators in and invite them to place their own lives amidst the action on stage.

Bakhtinian centrifugal tendencies present a potent means to invite spectators to recall their own AIDS remembrances. Writing for an educational narrative and arts-based research audience, Thomas Barone believes, "centrifugal tendencies in a text pull outward into the possibility of multiple voices using various languages. Centrifugal texts are polyphonic, multiple, and imperfect."[52] To Barone, this narrative approach in research invites readers, or in my case, spectators, "into the text so that they may reflect

[52] Tom Barone, "Narrative Researchers as Witnesses of Injustice and Agents of Social Change?" *Educational Researcher* 38.8 (2009): 594.

at a distance on analogous features of life outside the text."[53] In my analysis of Dan Fishback's *thirtynothing,* I argue that his use of allegory, metaphor, reminiscence, humor, and juxtapositions all function as Bakhtinian centrifugal tendencies which prompt spectators to imagine or fantasize about how the effects of AIDS continue to endure and spread beyond the performance space today. In this way, the performer and spectators jointly materialize what Decoteau calls "The Spector of AIDS" and in doing so, begin to challenge what David Román calls "end-of-AIDS" rhetoric.

In Chapter 4 ("Spurring Change Through "Perspective by Incongruity" in AIDS Comedies?"), I explore how using humor in AIDS representations might be one way to reacquaint spectators with the material effects of AIDS in the US. Since at least 1987 gay literary and performance critics have reached different conclusions about whether comedy is an appropriate genre for discussing and representing HIV/AIDS. Edmund White's 1987 declaration in *Artforum* that work about AIDS "must begin in tact, avoid humor, and end in anger" has been contested, especially by David B. Feinberg who accused White of making a "completely vacuous" argument composed with "cheap logic."[54] Feinberg viewed humor as an essential survival tactic or defense mechanism for the person with AIDS eager to distance themselves from the possible grisly effects of AIDS, or to maintain a sense of levity in the face of death. Comic AIDS representations proliferated in the early 1990s despite White's denouncement of AIDS humor. This opened new areas for scholarly inquiry as scholars have expanded their analysis of humor

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[53] Barone, 593.

[54] See respectively: Edmund White, "Esthetics and Loss," *Artforum International* 25.5(1987): 71 ; David B. Feinberg, *Queer and Loathing: Rants and Raves of a Raging AIDS Clone* (New York: Viking, 1994) 85.

to study particular sub-genres of comedy such as satire and parody, and questioned the political utility of certain gay performative traditions such as camp. Critics have argued that camp's use of coded language—understood predominantly by gay men and lesbians entrenched in gay culture—and nostalgia for a mythic past before AIDS, make it less useful for political interventions within audiences of mixed sexual identities and weaker ties to gay culture.

To better understand how comedy within AIDS mourning publics permits political interventions in mixed audiences with varying ties to gay culture, I examine plays that use satire and startle spectators primed for melodramatic tragedy. This practice is in keeping with what philosopher Kenneth Burke termed "perspective by incongruity." According to Burke, we possess a cultural "orientation" or a "bundle of judgments as to how things were, how they are, and how they may be."[55] Such orientations allow us to anticipate what to expect in similar situations. Beginning in the early 1980s tragedy was the dominant "orientation" with which AIDS was understood. Even with the life-saving qualities of antiretroviral treatments, tragedy remains the dominant Burkean AIDS "orientation" today. To unseat this tragic orientation we must juxtapose it with another orientation which is unexpected or doesn't match. To argue that Paula Vogel's AIDS farce, *The Baltimore Waltz*, and Ted Sod's dark AIDS comedy, *Satan and Simon DeSoto* presented opportunities to change AIDS perspectives through incongruity, I perform a close reading of each play and analyze reviewers' surprise when confronted with non-tragic AIDS representations. It is within this gap that spectators' views about people with AIDS are highly malleable. Beyond promoting AIDS awareness in this way, such plays

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[55] Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: U of California P, 1984), 14.

become a defense mechanism against AIDS grief for the playwrights who compose them and the spectators who watch performances. To make this argument, I utilize Paula Vogel and Ted Sod's reflections on how and why they created their plays. To argue that AIDS comedies can have similar effects in the "post-AIDS" era, I utilize critics' reactions to a 2004 revival of *Waltz* and the 1998 theatrical release of *Crocodile Tears*, a film adaptation of *Satan*.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Arlene Croce, who wrote the now infamous "Discussing the Undiscussable," provides a useful foil for my dissertation which uses performance studies as a lens to analyze both mourning through performance and performances about mourning. In describing why she wouldn't watch and review Bill T. Jones's *Still/Here* she called it an example of "anti-art" because Jones's dancers were all dying of terminal diseases, not offering artistic representations of dying. As such, mourning through performance would be anathema to Croce who calls *Still/Here* "victim art" and "utilitarian art" because the performers discuss their lived experience with terminal diseases and the show was advertised as providing a space where the cast and audience accrue emotional benefits. As the following case studies of *The Normal Heart* and *The Baltimore Waltz* will show, reviewers of these performances show a similar disdain for the emotional tremors pulsing the scripts and performances. Grief-induced anger reduces the aesthetic values of *Normal* and laughing about grief in *Waltz* is inappropriate, or so critics have said. I describe and critique these views at length, not to pillory the reviewers, but to create fresh occasions to argue that performance provides a needed and useful space for actors to work through

emotions of grief. Like Jones who believed spectators might benefit from their identifications with people on stage, I argue that AIDS mourning publics offer the same opportunity to spectators today.

Theatre studies is also a strong influence upon my exploration of a comedic and intergenerational dramaturgy within theatre and solo performance AIDS mourning publics between 1991-2014. In particular, theatre historiographers' methodologies toward understanding the theatrical event and its reception by spectators assist me as I analyze how dramatists and solo performers incorporate AIDS history and humor to challenge spectators' inherited AIDS narratives. Similarly, theatre historiography will help me as I seek to interpret and explain directors' and dramaturgs' efforts to frame revival productions of *The Baltimore Waltz* and *The Normal Heart* (in 2004 and 2011, respectively) to account for the shifting meanings of AIDS mourning publics over time and place.

To make my claims, I draw data from both the archive and repertoire, as theorized by Diana Taylor.[56] As an intervention in theatre and performance studies methodologies, Taylor argues that embodied memory—located within what she terms the repertoire—is a form of knowledge valuable in its own right, but also complementary to the official depository of written knowledge known as the archive. Forms enacting embodied memory include: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing, and other forms of "ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge."[57] Taylor aims not to privilege either the repertoire or the archive, but to unseat—and encourage other scholars to work

[56] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke U Press, 2003) 19-21.

[57] Taylor, 20.

against—a historical prejudice against the former. For example, Taylor begins with the "discovery" of America to detail how the embodied memory of indigenous populations was not considered knowledge by their Spanish colonizers who considered only written knowledge capable of documenting the past. Despite colonizers' efforts to destroy embodied knowledge, the transfer of indigenous cultural knowledge still occurred. Pointing to the durability and continuity of embodied knowledge despite considerable obstacles against its transfer helps establish its influence and significance.

THE ARCHIVE

Critical reviews of the contemporary solo performances analyze are also primarily found in community newspapers and blogs. These sources provide insight into how the critics and spectators reacted to these performances. Such reviews bridge the archive and repertoire because reviewers' embodied experience of the performance is presented in narrative form (most often) and then deposited into the archive. Performance in community settings predestined them to receive little to no mainstream attention. For example, Dan Fishback's *thirtynothing* premiered at New York City's Dixon Place, an experimental performance venue, and Adam Pinti's *The VOID* premiered at Arizona State University. Revivals of *The Baltimore Waltz* and *The Normal Heart* are anomalies in this regard because both occurred under special circumstances. *Waltz* was produced at the prestigious off-Broadway Signature Theatre as part of a three play Paula Vogel retrospective. Likewise, *Heart* captured mainstream media attention throughout the Broadway run and tour to Washington D.C. and San Francisco because the revival of this iconic AIDS play marked thirty-years since the start of the epidemic in the US. This

production also generated more print based and online sources because each of the three theatres organized pre or post show discussions with Larry Kramer or HIV/AIDS community experts, and created websites to provide background on the play and the current state of the AIDS epidemic. I have access to the scripts for all the performances I analyze because the solo performers have generously provided me with copies of their unpublished texts.

THE REPERTOIRE

My own experiences as a spectator viewing productions of *The Normal Heart, The VOID,* and *thirtynothing* aid me in understanding how the performers reframe AIDS narratives for their spectators in performance. In speaking with spectators after a performance, or when listening to post-play discussions, I also hear and can record their reflections upon how certain moments in the performance triggered memories of the AIDS past, for example. After a performance ends, a particular AIDS mourning public continues to resonate and extend beyond the confines of a performance space, as each spectator relays possibly to friends, co-workers and family (all absent from the performance) the ways in which s/he experienced these publics. The transmission of such memories can occur in-person, or via media such as text-messaging, phone conversations, social media posts, plays, films, and other forms. Tracking the unique ways each spectator shares her/his reflections and experiences is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but I mention the possibility of such an in-depth study to underscore how much discourse an AIDS mourning public can incite.

CHAPTER 2

USING THE US AIDS ARCHIVE AND REPERTOIRE IN DAN FISHBACK'S *THIRTYNOTHING* TO LOCATE "CREATIVE REBELLIOUS GAY BOYS"

In 2011 Broadway and off-Broadway theatres marked 30 years of HIV with celebrated revivals of iconic AIDS plays like *The Normal Heart* and *Angels in America.* The following year, filmmakers marked the 25th anniversary of the New York chapter of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) with *How to Survive a Plague* and *United in Anger: a History of ACT UP*. These retrospective documentaries hark back to the mid-1980s and early 1990s to depict a time when HIV-positive people and their loved ones challenged the government, medical establishment, homophobia, and self-righteous individuals just to stay alive. Educating spectators who are unfamiliar with this time is an admirable goal, but these revivals and documentaries recall a past isolated from the present. Any reference to the present state of AIDS in the US, as experienced by a younger generation especially, is so fleeting that these narratives unwittingly reinforce AIDS invisibility rhetoric referenced in Chapter 1.

In contrast, new solo plays such as Dan Fishback's *thirtynothing* (2011), Dan Horrigan's *The Big A* (2011), and Adam Pinti's *The VOID* (2011)—all presented in US fringe festivals or community theaters—explore AIDS imprint on the young performers' lives. In *thirtynothing*, for example, Fishback's performance reveals AIDS long shadow over his life despite an admission in the play's title that he knew nothing about gay artists who died during the pandemic or the AIDS activist culture that emerged to fight it. To educate younger spectators about this history and spur discussions about AIDS's effect today, Fishback subsequently toured his show throughout the US, primarily at

universities. For example, I produced a performance of *thirtynothing* at Arizona State in April 2013 as part of the ASU's Performance in the Borderlands' season. Fishback's play, which chronicles the imprint of AIDS upon the then thirty-year-old performer's life, presents a chronological examination of his associations, experiences, and growing knowledge of AIDS and AIDS related activism, broadly speaking, from 1983 until his thirtieth birthday in 2011. Since the effects of what is now known as HIV were first reported on June 3, 1981, and Fishback was born November 4, 1981, the play tracks his growing awareness of AIDS as both he and the epidemic age. He does this by pairing his personal and familial remembrances with moments from AIDS history.

One of his motivations for writing and performing his show is a recent diagnosis of chronic fatigue syndrome that led him to note the similarities between syndromes while confined to a bed for months. Unable to participate in the nighttime, commercial gay life of bars and circuit parties, he began to research the AIDS past and uncovered a gay life far more imaginative, queer, and life sustaining than the vision of gay life peddled by the mainstream and gay media. He also discovered that AIDS is culpable, in part, for the homonormative gay life he's inherited.[58] During the "archival process" of *thirtynothing*, Fishback mourns the loss of artists who *practiced* a different vision of gay life and in doing so, he creates an AIDS mourning public where spectators are invited to reconsider how AIDS has affected their lives too. Within this AIDS mourning public

[58] In Sarah Schulman's auto ethnography, *Gentrification of the Mind*, she makes a similar, but broader argument as she claims the massive AIDS deaths in New York during the plague years accelerated New York City's gentrification. Low wage cultural workers integrated into and improved New York City neighborhoods and then died of AIDS, allowing rent-controlled and stabilized properties to welcome new, high-wage residents interested in fleeing the suburbs to explore the city's allure. She also describes the post-plague years as a time of cultural and spiritual gentrification for gay and lesbian people. Like Fishback, her hope is that gays and lesbians will soon imagine and begin practicing another way of life.

Fishback finds and forwards an inspirational vision of gay life that can be life saving for many.

Beginning with highly personal motivations and experiences, Fishback uses allegory, metaphor, remembrances, juxtapositions, and interpellating second person pronouns, all in ways that function as Bakhtinian centrifugal tendencies that prompt spectators to recall and reflect upon the many ways AIDS has affected their own lives. In this way, the performer and spectators undertake a joint archival and repertoric effort combining reminiscence and AIDS history to materialize the many ghosts of AIDS. In so doing, they also elucidate how the effects of AIDS continue beyond the performance space today. Structuring the play in this way allows Fishback to overcome powerful obstacles that keep AIDS spectral, including the LGBT generation gap, systemic erasure of queer history, commercial or victimizing representations of gay life, and the AIDS manageability narrative. I consider how Fishback highlights and responds to each obstacle in turn before considering the play's centrifugal tendencies.

In interviews, Fishback credits the cultural invisibility of AIDS with obliterating all cultural memory of the epidemic, save for the basic scientific knowledge of how HIV is transmitted. Educating himself and spectators about the cultural significance of AIDS and his gay artist forefathers' efforts to combat the epidemic then becomes the impetus for this project. Fishback explains, "The weird thing is we all grew up knowing that AIDS existed and knowing that it had to do with gay people. But you actually have to hunt down information to understand the scope of the disaster and that should be something we know. My outrage at my own ignorance has been a real drive for this

piece."[59] My personal experience mirrors the playwrights' experience. Although I lived through the period of ACT UP's most vibrant activity, I had never heard of this grass roots organization until I was an undergraduate in Professor Barry Witham's Theatre of the Holocaust class at the University of Washington in 2003. My interest in ACT UP was aroused after a chance reading of an essay which mentioned ACT UP's inversion of the pink triangle that homosexual men were required to wear at Nazi concentration camps. Had I not stumbled upon this reference in the most unlikely of places it's probable that I would still know little about the cultural impact of AIDS. In addition, I likely wouldn't have begun a personal AIDS archival project that launched a master's thesis and doctoral dissertation.

Dan Fishback's and my experience of knowing little about AIDS is not uncommon in the US. Scholars and activists have written much about the "invisibility" of AIDS within mainstream media and culture from the beginning of the epidemic. A review of their work creates a timeline showing when AIDS in the mainstream public sphere was first invisible, then visible, then "invisible" again. For example, the Silence=Death Project which began in 1986 and helped beget the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) in 1987 is just one early group that encouraged gay men and lesbians to break through political and medical authorities' silence and inaction regarding AIDS.[60] ACT UP's success in focusing mainstream media attention upon AIDS was short lived. Douglas Crimp's *Mourning and Militancy* (1989) offers a theoretical explanation for why traumatized gay men and lesbians were turning away from the

[59] Dan Fishback, interview by Adam Baran.

[60] See Morrison 2007 for more on the history of ACT UP.

epidemic. In the same year, David Wojnarowicz wrote about his frustration that his friends' deaths failed to garner mainstream attention. Four years later, the *New York Times*—a symbol of mainstream public discourse—posthumously published *Times* AIDS beat reporter Jeffrey Schmalz's "Whatever Happened to AIDS?" in which Schmalz discusses his own AIDS diagnosis and desperation that AIDS is no longer a "hot topic in America."[61] Schmalz said, "The world is moving on, uncaring, frustrated and bored, leaving by the roadside those of us who are infected …"[62] Myriad reasons are given to explain why individuals turned away from or lost interest in HIV/AIDS: self-protection from the continued trauma of seeing one's loved ones die, insouciance because one is not within a group at "high risk" for infection, or overexposure to AIDS, which Larry Kramer called being "AIDSed out." The July 1996 announcement that taking a combination of protease inhibitors successfully slowed HIV disease progression in patients taking such medications provided a new explanation for this turn. Claire Decoteau asserts that science and medical authorities accelerated the turn away from AIDS and towards its "invisibility" by using this medical innovation to champion a manageability narrative that fooled the US American public into believing that the US AIDS epidemic is under control and effectively over.

thirtynothing also implies that transmitting gay history and culture is made difficult by mainstream and gay media which presents a highly commercialized and sexualized caricature of this culture. Fishback explains that one of his early sources for information on gay life—the Rockville Pike Borders store's gay magazine section—left

[61] Jeffrey Schmalz, "Whatever Happened to AIDS?," *New York Times Magazine* 28 Nov. 1993: 56.

[62] Schmalz, 56.

him and his friends with a skewed understanding of gay culture that he could not identify with. For example, he explains that the Border's gay magazine section taught him "that gay people were all: Swedish, hairless, and very, very shiny."[63] Lanky, Jewish and hairy chested, Fishback tried to mold himself to fit this narrow image of a gay man with horrifying results. His attempt to use a home waxing kit went horribly wrong after he accidently spilled a tray of hot wax across his chest. Worse, he tried to remove the wax by standing naked in his shower and splashing nail polish remover across his chest before fainting from what he calls a nail polish remover induced "chemical burn" in his testicles. Waking up angry and in pain he lashes out at gay culture by asking, "How is it possible that my sexuality leads me to want to make art and dismantle capitalism, while it turns all other gay men into these…boring, Aryan, eugenic, ayn rand, shopaholic consumerist bimbos? How is it possible that I am the ONLY creative, rebellious gay boy who HAS EVER LIVED?"[64]

Communication scholar Dustin Bradley Goltz's study of mainstream film and television representations of gay men helps explain why Fishback never encountered representations of creative, rebellious gay boys. To Goltz these mainstream representations of gay life primarily occur within a "heteronormative tragedy" genre that disciplines gay men for abandoning the acceptable, heteronormative path of heterosexual marriage, children, and death. This genre frames gay male futures "as a ritualized sacrifice, a tragic punishment for the sanctification of 'straight time,' cautioning those who deviate from the heteronormative path that misery is insured. Regardless of genre,

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[63] Dan Fishback, *thirtynothing*, 2011, ts, author's personal archive, 11.

[64] Fishback, *thirtynothing*, 12.

gay male lives, gay male aging, and gay male futures remain tales of horror."[65] In heteronormative tragedies overt gay men don't have a future because they are victims of homophobic violence, commit suicide, die of AIDS (particularly in gay male representations of the 1980s and 1990s), or live without meaning as uncoupled, isolated, perverted, and miserable men.[66]

Creative, rebellious gay boys have lived beyond youth to experience happy, successful, and impactful lives, but the systematic erasure of queer culture makes uncovering information about their lives difficult. Joan Nestle's description of lesbians' efforts to uncover lesbian "herstory" can be applied more generally to queer culture. In describing the Lesbian Herstory Archives incorporation in 1974 as a way to record a history of New York Lesbians, cofounder Joan Nestle explains the systematic erasure of lesbian culture by adapting to this culture, ideas presented in Albert Memmi's *The Colonizer and the Colonized*. Memmi asserted that colonizers either don't preserve or actively erase the colonized's past. Nestle's efforts to forward to future generations of lesbians a story "told by us, shared by us and preserved by us" is part of an effort to record what Edward Thompson called "History from Below." In Thompson's April 7, 1966 *Times Literary Supplement* article, he noted historians' growing interest in writing from the perspective of the masses or common man instead of the ruling elite as is often

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[65] Dustin Bradley Goltz, *Queer Temporalities in Gay Male Representation: Tragedy, Normativity, and Futurity* (New York: Routledge, 2010) 47-48.

[66] Goltz, 55. Despite the popular myth of the isolated, miserable, single, older gay man, several studies have shown that older gay men exhibit less depression compared to older heterosexual men. See Michael J. Cruz, *Sociological Analysis of Aging: The Gay Male Perspective* (New York: Harrington Park P, 2003) 16 ; Alan L. Ellis, introduction, *Gay Men at Midlife: Age Before Beauty*, ed. Alan L. Ellis (New York: Harrington Park P, 2001) 4 ; and Andrew J. Hostetler, "Old, Gay, and Alone? The Ecology of Well-Being Among Middle-Aged and Older Single Gay Men," *Gay and Lesbian Aging: Research and Future Directions*, eds. Gilbert Herdt and Brian de Vries (New York: Springer P, 2004) 155.

the case with much historical writing which focuses solely upon "the doings of the great." Thus, to tell US queers' stories, they must join with racial minority, female, working class, disabled and other marginalized groups in a project that Suzan-Lori Parks later called "locat[ing] the ancestral burial ground, dig[ing] for bones, find[ing] bones, hear[ing] the bones sing, writ[ing] it down."[67]

Fishback explains in *thirtynothing* how the cultural invisibility of AIDS history makes locating these bones difficult. In his efforts to uncover information about creative, rebellious gay boy photographer, Mark Morrisroe, he tried the internet, public and private libraries, interlibrary loan, and interviews with Morrisroe's former boyfriend, Ramsey McPhillips. Fishback summarizes his search results: "Google doesn't really tell you very much about Mark Morrisroe, and the public library doesn't do much better, and the private libraries really don't do much better than *that*."[68] The lack of biographical information about many of the gay artists Fishback references can be explained by mainstream media's aversion to the honest perspectives on AIDS and gay life in the '80s and '90s which was often these artists' focus. For example, Fishback located scant biographical information on painter Patrick Angus and little critical review of his paintings which presented a raw, uncensored view of gay male sexual behavior in gay bathhouses and strip clubs. Their media— theatre, photography, and painting—also predispose them to what I call "biographical narrative ephemerality" because these media are either difficult to archive (theatre) or the content of the medium rarely contain biographical details in the narrative form that archivists are familiar and comfortable with

[67] Suzan-Lori Parks, *The America Play and Other Works* (New York: TCG, 1995) 4.

[68] Fishback, *thirtynothing*, 3.

recording. Biographical details are much easier to find for novelists such as David B. Feinberg, who Fishback also profiles at length. Feinberg was a successful novelist which may have led more "serious" publications such as *New York Times* and *Current Biography* to note his passing. Additionally, some of his biographical details can be deduced from his work since he used his life as grist for writing. That he wrote about gay life during the turbulent late eighties and early nineties, and found success with semi-autobiographical writing, may also explain writers' interest in his passing.

Queers' efforts to dig for and find their history is further stymied by their lack of biological ties to queer ancestors. Unlike Parks who can turn to her biological family for at least a partial understanding of African-American history, many queers are reared by heterosexual family members who often know nothing about queer history and may even be hostile to their children's attempts to learn this history. LGBT youth reared in small towns and cities are also less likely to learn their history from supportive, non-relative, LGBT adults who are less visible in these settings. LGBT adults' fears of being labeled a pedophile or homosexual recruiter if they initiated contact with LGBT youth is one powerful barrier separating generations of LGBT people.[69]

In Bohan, Russell, and Montgomery's long-term qualitative study of the generation gap between gay youth and gay adults, the researchers found that the rapid rate of socio-political change within LGBT communities leads gay youth to perceive that LGBT generations span a few years rather than several decades.[70] The authors explain

[69] For example, see, Michael J. Cruz, *Sociological Analysis of Aging: The Gay Male Perspective* (New York: Harrington Park P, 2003) 27.

[70] Janis S. Bohan, Glenda M. Russell, and Suki Montgomery, "Gay Youth and Gay Adults: Bridging the Generation Gap," *Journal of Homosexuality* 44.1 (2002): 20.

this rapid emergence of generations by turning to Margaret Mead's *Culture and Commitment: A Study of the Generation Gap* where Mead asserts that groups experiencing vast social change tend to produce adults who "have no descendants [and] children [who] have no forebears."[71] Thus, each mini generation has different experiences at home, school, in the workplace, and within their communities which, in turn, produces generational stratification which may make it difficult for an individual of one generation to find common ground with individuals from another generation even if one were given the opportunity to intermingle.

Communication scholar Ragan Fox's qualitative study based on interviews with members of the Phoenix, Arizona chapter of "Prime Timers," confirms that experiential and behavioral differences between generations complicate intergenerational communication.[72] For example, Fox determined that it would be difficult for the group's primarily closeted gay, older members to build coalitions with or bond with younger men who celebrate and don't hide their sexuality. The older men appreciate their privacy and described being turned off by the effeminate behavior they associated with younger gay men. In addition, Fox notes that the older men frequently described younger gay men using disparaging, sex infused native terms which dehumanize them and foreground the older generation as lustful perverts, if not pedophiles.[73] Using such terms only amplify

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[71] Margaret Mead, *Culture and Commitment: A Study of the Generation Gap* (New York: Doubleday, 1970) 76.

[72] Ragan Cooper Fox, "Gay Grows Up: An Interpretive Study on Aging Metaphors and Queer Identity," *Journal of Homosexuality* 52.3/4 (2007): 33-61.

[73] For instance, Fox examines how some older gay men use the native term "chicken" to describe young, naïve and sexually and emotionally inexperienced men. Fox bristles at the message such a term conveys: "In its most basic sense, chicken is meat that is raised for consumption. The word is paradoxically and covertly connected to the marginalization of gay men and the socially constructed myth that older

youths' fears of older men and possibly create more distance within the intergenerational communication chasm.

The LGBT generation gap, systematic erasure of queer history, and the commercialized or victimizing representations that gay and mainstream media peddle all make it difficult for LGBT youth to see glimpses of gay life. Goltz's interest in understanding the heteronormative tragedy genre and how it might be circumvented is motivated by his assumption that these representations contribute to young gay men's well documented fear of aging which, in turn, leads them to exhibit "self-destructive behaviors" such as drug and alcohol use, depression, suicide, and suicidal ideation which occur at increased rates relative to heterosexual youth.[74] This suggested link is built upon a cultural studies understanding that media representations do more than reflect reality—they help shape it.[75] Like Goltz, researchers of gay youth attitudes, Bohan, Russell and Montgomery are weary of the effects of mainstream gay male representations, but they believe these effects are caused not by a fear of aging, but an assumption that suffering is their lot in life. According to these researchers,

> the plethora of communications emphasizing these risks [harassment, problems in school, suicide ideation, family and peer conflict] may actually convey to LGBT youth a life narrative or script that predisposes them toward suffering—that is, the narratives may have *prescriptive* as well as *descriptiv*e power. Indeed, the

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homosexuals *eat* 'chicken,' the word used to connote younger men." See respectively: Fox, *Gay Grows Up*, 44 ; 46.

[74] Goltz 10.

[75] Goltz notes gay media representations also contribute to gay men's established fear of aging because with rare exception—such as Bear sexual culture— gay male culture privileges and values youth. See Goltz 6.

> visibility granted such stories of suffering may persuade LGBT teens that an enactment of this suffering, suicidal script constitutes an effective route to the attention and validation that we all seek—adolescents perhaps even more than adults.[76]

Thus, Bohan's, Russell's and Montgomery's concern is that teens may engage in risky behaviors because the prevalence of the "suffering/ suicidal script (their name for the "heteronormative tragedy") leads youth to believe such behavior is emblematic of the experiences of all LGBT people.

Regardless of what leads LGBT youth to engage in self-destructive behaviors or take risks, Goltz, Bohan, Russell, and Montgomery all assert that making *visible*, stories of non-heteronormative tragedies could offer these youth much benefit. To date, Dan Savage's "It Gets Better Campaign," which he and his partner launched in 2011, is one of the most popular programs designed to make visible, images of successful and happy LGBT adults. The program was created with an understanding that poor intergenerational contact between LGBT generations prevents young bullied LGBT teens from realizing that the lives of many older queers have flourished after they graduated high school and left bullies, terrible teachers, and unsupportive family members behind. To overcome this obstacle, Savage invites LGBT individuals, particularly adults, to post videos on the itgetsbetter.org website so LGBT youth can hear their stories of success and happiness after high school.[77] Fishback's show attempts a similar maneuver in that

[76] Bohan, Russell, and Montgomery, 28.

[77] After reading about a series of bullied LGBT youth who committed suicide, Savage and his partner posted a YouTube video where they briefly described awful teenage experiences shaped by high school

he hopes to inspire younger queers by presenting stories of past "creative, rebellious gay boy[s]" who used their art to fight the governments and medical establishment's intransigence while dying of AIDS.[78] Likewise, Fishback bridges the gay generation gap under an assumption that connecting gay youth with previous generations can be life-saving. However, Fishback's project differs significantly from Savage's because he encourages LGBT youth to begin making life-saving connections with queer culture now, instead of waiting until they graduate or leave home. The archival journey that he showcases in *thirtynothing* serves as an example that spectators may follow. Fishback's own experience suggests the benefits that may accrue in digging beneath the commercialized images and venues that dominate queer culture:

> It's only in the past year that I've started to plant deeper roots in the queer daytime community. It's been tremendously rewarding and that's one of the reasons why I began working on *thirtynothing*. I was trying to get in touch with some element of my queerness that existed apart from partying at night, something that I could relate to without ruining my body, that could take place through researching the history of my people and relating to people who came before me.[79]

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bullies and familial strains after coming out as gay. Next, the pair tell happy, post-graduation stories about how the couple met, fell in love, reared a son, and became accepted as a couple by their once estranged families. Savage explains, "The point of the project is to give despairing LGBT kids *hope.* The point is to let them know that things *do* get better, using the examples of our own lives. See: Dan Savage, "How it Happened: the Genesis of a YouTube Movement," *The Stranger*, 13 April 2011, Web, 22 March 2013.

[78] Fishback, *thirtynothing*, 12.

[79] Dan Fishback, interview by Adam Baran. "I Live With Loss Every Day," *Keepthelightsonfilm.com*, 30 Aug. 2011, Web, 29 Nov. 2011.

Finding inspiration in queers who died of AIDS may seem to perpetuate the "heteronormative tragedy" that Goltz implores, but we must remember that Goltz objects most to victimizing representations of people with AIDS. The artists Fishback mentions did more than just die of AIDS, they also fought authorities in the process. Whatever imperfections they might have as individuals—such as Wojnarowicz's and Morrisroe's past as underage sex workers and drug users—must be overlooked in light of their contributions to what Jose Muñoz calls a "queer futurity" marked by *queerness*. I use italics to call attention to how Muñoz uses queerness to denote a utopic future that can be sensed and is a force of desire that spurs forward people working to realize a better, more queer future. Like Fishback, Muñoz investigates moments in the past and holds them up as idealized traces of *queerness* that give us hope for a better tomorrow. The experiences and hardships faced by the icons of the AIDS past that Fishback recalls, can offer us all inspiration as we imagine and work toward a better, more queer future.

Simply recalling the AIDS past without placing that past within the context of the present is not enough to counteract the cultural invisibility of AIDS. Recent retrospective films that purport to do so by documenting the work of AIDS activists during the late '80s and early '90s may in fact actually contribute to the present invisibility of AIDS. Films such as David France's *How to Survive a Plague* (2012) ignore the AIDS present, especially as experienced by young gay men. Billed as "the story of two coalitions ACT UP and TAG (Treatment Action Group)," the film actually tells how ACT UP and TAG revolutionized the drug development process in the US and helped usher in the protease inhibitor combination therapy breakthrough.[80] Telling this story is much easier than

[80] Surviveaplague.com, How to Survive a Plague, LLC, 2015, Web, 5 Oct. 2015.

telling the history of ACT UP which would require that France look more deeply into ACT UP's HIV prevention efforts and lead to a messier and unfinished narrative. Archival video footage is used to tell this treatment story from ACT UP's inception in 1987 until the narrative climaxes in 1995 with the breakthrough that is revealed to us in present day interviews with two scientists from the pharmaceutical company, Merck. Contemporary interviews with TAG members in which they describe the effects of this discovery follow. TAG member Peter Staley reports that after he and friends took the recommended regimen of combination therapy drugs, "sure enough it happened to us within 30 days, all of us. Undetectable [HIV viral load], undetectable, undetectable." TAG member Mark Harrington describes the visual effects of these drugs on people with AIDS: "You would see their Kaposi sarcoma lesions that had been bright and red and, um, big, melting back into their skin." Admittedly this is an achievement worth celebrating, but in making the combination therapy breakthrough the climax of the film, he avoids referencing in detail anything that might detract from this victory. In a title card within the closing credits he alludes to—but never explains—economic problems with these treatments: "The number of people who die [globally] because they can't afford AIDS drugs: 2,000,000 every year, 5,500 every day, 4 every minute." This places the blame on poor people with AIDS, not drug manufacturers like Merck who price these drugs so high that developing countries would become bankrupt if they purchased them for all their citizens with AIDS. Battles over these drugs' prices continue even in the US where AIDS activists must frequently battle with politicians to retain state and federal funding for them.[81] This victory would also be complicated had France mentioned the

[81] For example, on November 27, 2012 AIDS activists from a variety of groups staged a naked protest in

many side effects of these drugs: diarrhea, lipodystrophy, heart disease, diabetes, and liver disease. The danger in not reporting how combination therapy is a qualified victory is that it reinforces the manageability narrative that Decoteau warns was created to fool the US public into believing that the US AIDS epidemic is under control and effectively over. Many veteran AIDS activists have warned that this manageability narrative might lead young gay men into believing that AIDS is no big deal. All they have to do to live a "normal" life is pay their health insurance bill and visit their local pharmacy to buy these expensive drugs. We never learn in France's film whether these veteran activists' premonitions are correct because we never hear how the epidemic progressed after 1996 beyond learning that people who could afford these drugs didn't die. In making the narrative jump from 1996 to 2011, he dangerously contributes to the invisibility of AIDS because he ignores the experiences of people in the US during that fifteen year span.

In spite of the "manageability narrative" that France forwards, people continue to become HIV-positive and die of AIDS complications in the US as well as globally. According to US Centers for Disease Control estimates, in the year before *thirtynothing's* premiere (2010), at least 29,800 gay or bisexual men tested HIV-positive, representing 63% of all new HIV infections that year.[82] Although AIDS is no longer an immediate death sentence, deaths still occur. In the same year at least 15, 529 people of varying ages and sexual orientations died in the US.[83] This pales in comparison to the 1.5 million

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House Speaker John Boehner's office to protest budget cuts to global and US AIDS treatment budgets. See Ring, Trudy, "Naked AIDS Activists Protest at Boehner's Office," www.advocate.com, 27 Nov 2012.

[82] Centers for Disease Control, *HIV in the United States: At a Glance*, Atlanta: CDC, Feb. 2013, Web, 26 Mar. 2013.

[83] Centers for Disease Control, *HIV in the United States: At a Glance*.

people who died of AIDS globally in 2013, but underscoring that deaths continue to occur in the US helps undermine the "manageability narrative."[84]

During France's fifteen-year narrative gap, Fishback and other gay men experienced the AIDS-induced queer generation gap as depicted in *thirtynothing*. "Transmission anxiety," or fear of HIV transmission, was another way the epidemic psychologically and physically affected Fishback. Since this experience is still a real fear of many people as they attempt safer sex in the AIDS era, Fishback's detailed descriptions of his awkward teenage and young adult sexual experiences in the play create in the performance what German literary theorist Wolfgang Iser called, "blanks."[85] In such moments the readers' or in my case, spectators, are invited to juxtapose memories of their lives outside the play text and performance world with those presented in the text / performance. In this example, spectators are invited to compare and contrast their early sexual experiences and attendant fears of HIV transmission with those presented by Fishback. The beauty of Iser's "blanks" is that many things can elicit these pauses, and for many aims. Creating blanks at points of contradiction between narratives of an authoritative script and a woman's lived or remembered experience has been one way feminists have prompted readers to uncover social forces acting on women's lives. In performance, adherents of Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre have also used juxtaposition of incongruous ideologies, actor training methods, stage settings, and more to motivate spectators to similarly ponder the social forces at work in a particular moment. Fishback

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[84] World Health Organization, *Global Health Observatory Data*, Geneva: WHO, n.p., Web, 28 Oct. 2015.

[85] Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins P, 1974) 113.

uses contradictions in a similar fashion. These blanks in the performance are essential as they force spectators to contrast Fishback's and their experiences with the manageability narrative which, in turn, leads them to see the fallacies within this narrative. This then nudges them to reconsider stereotypes that claim to be emblematic of the US AIDS experience today.

Such blanks and the literary devices structuring Fishback's play—allegory, remembrances, and juxtapositions—all become Bakhtinian centrifugal tendencies which tempt spectators to apply their own memories to the on-stage action by pulling the play's world out into their own. I first encountered the work of Wolfgang Iser and Russian social and literary critic, Mikhail Bakhtin, in Thomas Barone's arts based narrative inquiry class. In this course Barone advocated using centrifugal tendencies in essays about educational life, hopeful that doing so would encourage the reader to imagine new ways of teaching and learning.[86] I have a similar motivation, but I examine how centrifugal tendencies can be potent in AIDS plays and performances. According to Bakhtin, dialogic texts, in which centrifugal tendencies occur, allow the potential for multiple voices and languages within the text and do not privilege one voice over another. In contrast, monologic texts feature centripetal forces which pull a reader into a text in a way that removes any uncertainty that the author's voice and his accounting of events is correct. In effect, the construction of the latter texts screen against alternate interpretations of events. In contrast, centrifugal tendencies in texts break through such screens to invite readers, or in my case, spectators, to bring the text out into their lives

[86] A succinct summary of Barone's advocacy of centrifugal tendencies: Tom Barone, "Narrative Researchers as Witnesses of Injustice and Agents of Social Change?," *Educational Researcher* 38.8 (2009): 591-597.

where they can reflect upon the similarities or dissonances between life on stage and outside the theatre.

My understanding of centrifugal tendencies within dialogic play texts and Fishback's use of these tendencies to great effect provides a more radical perspective on the potentials of dialogism than commonly accepted within playwriting schools and text-based dramatic criticism. For example, in Paul C. Castagno's immensely popular playwriting text—*New Playwriting Strategies: Language and Media in the 21st Century*—he identifies a new style of playwriting which he terms, "language based playwriting." He tracks its emergence back to the 1970s and associates it with US playwrights Len Jenkin, Eric Overmyer, Mac Wellman and a host of newly established US playwrights such as Suzan-Lori Parks, Sarah Ruhl, Young Jean Lee, and Alice Tuan. Castagno notes that "Dialogism, in its various manifestations, is the fundamental principle at work in new playwriting."[87] Dialogism, he explains, "represents the play's capacity to interact within itself, as if its various components were in dialogue with each other."[88] Both "multivocality" and "polyvocality" make possible the competing perspectives the playwright places in dialogue within the text. Multivocality can be seen in a character's fluctuating and unlimited speech possibilities as different speech genres, street slang, high toned discourse, dialects, different languages, and hybrid languages such as Spanglish may be used depending upon context.[89] Similarly, Castagno sees playwrights growing tendency to incorporate within their text found texts by other

[87] Paul C. Castagno, *New Playwriting Strategies: Language and Media in the 21st Century*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2012) 10.

[88] Castagno, 11.

[89] Castagno, 29.

authors or sources—a practice he attributes to polyvocality—to be within a spirit of dialogism. In both of these examples, Castagno presents dialogism as stemming from the particular texts a playwright draws from, and the unique and oftentimes collage-like language style s/he gives to each character. In his analysis he doesn't consider that the spectators themselves may be one of those voices or perspectives operating within the dialogic performance. More importantly, he ignores the potential political effects of dialogism when he celebrates multivocality as allowing "local color and authenticity" or in viewing theatrical dialogism as a natural by-product of globalization.[90]

Fishback's use of centrifugal tendencies is effective because he invites spectators' engagement with the play from the beginning. In the solo play's opening moment Dan shows how he and his family live their lives while people with AIDS die, and AIDS activists conduct demonstrations in the shadows. In establishing at the outset how AIDS is culturally "invisible," he piques viewers' attention and prompts their desire to learn more. This is accomplished in the opening moment of *thirtynothing* when Fishback presents a looping, silenced scene from the film *Living with AIDS* where a slim Todd Coleman lifts his shirt to show Kaposi sarcoma (KS) lesions to his doctor and then is comforted by this partner, Bob Runyon. As the video clip loops we hear a blaring 1983 audio tape of Fishback's parents coaxing him to say his name at two years old. In pairing these moments—which stage directions claim are both from 1983—the viewer is led to understand that the couple are in an *unheard* struggle to save Coleman's life and their relationship while families like the Fishbacks can make loud and silly audiotapes that mark as significant, mundane acts like a child saying his name. Following this

[90] Castagno 32, 11.

introduction, Fishback then continues on to explore the many ways that the cultural "invisibility" of AIDS is maintained and the effects it yields.

To convince his spectators to join him as he uncovers a genealogy of creative, rebellious gay boys, Fishback often describes the men in highly appealing terms. For example, soon after the show begins, Fishback describes fond childhood memories of the popular cartoon *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe.* This is soon revealed to be a clever allegory for his gay superhero archival interests because after the opening credits for *He-Man* end, we see film footage of a 1989 ACT UP demonstration at the Food and Drug Administration, where they were demanding an accelerated approval process for HIV treatments. Here Fishback connects superheroes like Prince Adam who can transform into the powerful He-Man upon holding a sword aloft and reciting a phrase, with gay and lesbian people who have extraordinary powers as activists. In addition to being "strange and unusual," Fishback also describes his gay superheroes as sexy, dangerous, creative, and punk-ass to underscore their allure.

Throughout Fishback's gay superhero archival process he describes the output of the artists he profiles as captivating in a way similar to seeing an attractive stranger from across the room at a party. Fishback narrates the common occurrence where one's attention is drawn to an attractive stranger and his attractiveness leads the viewer to ponder what is beneath the surface that is so magnetizing. Fishback explains, "Like they have something *you* need, but *you* don't know what it is, and so *you* can't ask for it. *You* just stare at them (or try not to stare), praying that if *you* just hang out long enough, *you'll* figure out what the fuck *you've* been waiting for."[91] Aside from using this allegory to

[91] Fishback, *thirtynothing*, 4.

underscore the galvanizing allure between queer people, Fishback's frequent use of the second person pronoun serves to invite the spectator into the performance. The pronoun "you" is scattered throughout the monologue play as a result of Fishback's conversational tone; the periodic use of "you" is just one of the many ways the performance features centrifugal tendencies.

In performance Fishback harnesses popular AIDS cultural texts that many can relate to in order to invite viewers to recall and ponder their relationship to AIDS. Fishback fingers Jonathan Larson's musical *Rent* for its marked influence on his adolescent understanding of AIDS and gay culture, so it's a perfect text for this purpose. For example, one of Fishback's few memories of AIDS during his adolescence involves Jonathan Larson's musical *Rent*. Fishback recalls how he and his high school drama club friends enjoyed taking on the parts of Roger, Angel, and Mimi. While singing the musical's score, his straight female drama club friends often "gyrated on their knees, bemoaning their imaginary HIV infections."[92] Their fascination with the glamour of *Rent* led them to seek what Fishback calls "*Rent*-like adventures" in Manhattan's East Village. Ignorant to the marked differences between West and East Village, the group's plan was foiled after they found themselves surrounded by the high income, residential neighborhoods of the New York City's West Village neighborhood. During their *Rent* adventures, Fishback's friends often encouraged him to sing and perform Angel's part, despite his inability to identify with the character. In the musical the only gay men—Angel and Tom Collins—are supporting characters who are homeless and have HIV; drag queen Angel dies from AIDS complications midway through the second act, leaving

[92] Fishback, *thirtynothing*, 14.

Tom to mourn her passing and fear his demise throughout the musical's remainder. Fishback's reluctance to take on Angel's part makes sense because a clear message within *Rent* is that gay men have no future. Their fates are exemplars of Goltz's "heteronormative tragedy" genre referenced earlier.

Fishback discovers much later when mining his gay history that writer and queer activist Sarah Schulman accused Jonathan Larson of stealing plot points from her book *People in Trouble* for use in his musical.[93] More importantly, Fishback begins to see that Larson altered AIDS history to show gay and straight people suffering equally from AIDS instead of showing "how straight people were systematically neglecting the gay community during the AIDS crisis, and were, in fact, complicit in the mass death experience that was happening all around them."[94]

Fishback's inkling that being gay can be so much more than what he is presented in magazines and movies is lovingly articulated in his parody of Roger's "One Song Glory" from Rent, an excerpt of which is below.

> I know it exists: A world of genius, where trash has subtleties.
> I see the evidence dripping off of its thieves.
> And so I'm on it, so I'm tracing the crime, like a full-time spy, tho it's infinitely hard.
> I see it everywhere, but never more than a shard.[95]

Fishback's loneliness and hunger for a vibrant, creative, and rebellious gay community is palpable within his lyrics and his aforementioned bathroom floor reflection on a chest

[93] For Schulman's perspective see, Sarah Schulman, *Stagestruck: Theater, AIDS, and the Marketing of Gay America* (Durham: Duke U P, 1998).

[94] Fishback, *thirtynothing*, 15.

[95] Fishback, *thirtynothing*, 15

waxing gone wrong. As he sings in the parody, he sees shards and traces of such a world, but following these clues to uncover it requires the efforts of a "full time spy." Parodying Roger's "One Song Glory" is fitting because the original song presents the HIV-positive protagonist's primary conflict in the musical, which is only overcome when he allows himself to love HIV-positive Mimi in spite of the possibility that she may die. The one glorious song that he thought would be his legacy makes possible his true legacy, which is his heterosexual love and coupling with Mimi after the song brings her back to life. As Fishback and others note, placing a heterosexual coupling at the center of the play and showing straight and gay people to be suffering equally from AIDS falsifies the US AIDS pandemic as experienced by gay men. Thus, Fishback's parody embeds a larger critique that mainstream culture is responsible for erasing, altering, or burying evidence of the world he must seek on his own in hopes of ending his sense of isolation.

Throughout the play Fishback shares similar history lessons as he uncovers largely forgotten gay, AIDS "superheroes" like Patrick Angus, David B. Feinberg, performer Ethyl Eichelberger, poet Essex Hemphill and others. In introducing these superheroes and explaining how he uncovered information about them through using internet search engines, the New York Public Library archives, and interlibrary loan, he suggests to the audience that there is much more to gay culture than what he describes as the "commercial, stupid, vacuous, dance club, waxed, muscled body, shopping kind of thing" epitomized by television shows such as "A List: New York."[96] His performance prompts spectators to begin to investigate and reconsider their roots.

[96] Dan Fishback, interview by Adam Baran.

A talk-back session following the ASU *thirtynothing* performance revealed spectators did recall AIDS memories, particularly about "transmission anxiety," upon hearing Fishback describe his own fears. One gay male spectator in his thirties reported recalling his own awkward sexual encounters where the awkwardness was intensified by high school sex education bred fears of breaking condoms and lying partners. This also made him think about partners who pressured him to have sex without condoms within supposedly monogamous relationships and partners' promises of being HIV-negative.

Spectators at the ASU talk back also reported thinking about their own experiences in relationship to other themes Fishback mentioned, particularly their memories of first learning about AIDS. One female spectator in her mid-forties remembered how she giggled and felt embarrassed after a theatre instructor demonstrated placing a condom on a banana and followed it with a warning: "Now more than ever it is matter of life and death." Another spectator, in her late twenties, described the confusion she experienced as she learned about AIDS amidst mixed messages; following the AIDS related death of a well-liked neighbor's partner, this viewer's parents still reassured her that she didn't need to worry about HIV affecting her. Other spectators confirmed Fishback's thoughts about AIDS invisibility while they were growing up. One female spectator in her forties reminisced about how—as a young girl-- she would see posters mentioning AIDS on West Hollywood power poles, leading her to wonder what AIDS meant.

In an interview with Fishback, he also described both older and young spectators approaching him after the show, eager to share their own AIDS memories. Younger

spectators, particularly, shared stories of feeling out of place within gay and mainstream culture and describing their own surprise that a history of queer AIDS activism existed.

> At the end of every single show so many people would come up and talk to me. In the show I mention that David Feinberg accused everyone in ACT UP of having failed because he was dying. I talked to so many people who were at that meeting and so many of them had been so traumatized by that. A lot of old ACT UP people came up and talked to me and thanked me. A couple came up and said that they had some original Mark Morrisroe prints in their apartment and they invited me to see them. A lot of other younger people had similar experiences with *Rent*. And A LOT of younger men-- my age and younger—related to my experience of feeling outside of gay body culture and had these intense experiences of sort of drawing the connections between that and the historical situation in which we were growing up. Mostly younger men would come up to me and say, "I didn't know anything about this;" "I had no idea that this was an issue;" "I had no idea that I had a history;" "I had no idea there were so many cultural heroes I didn't know about."[97]

Of course, using allegory and other literary devices in testimonial solo performance, is not new, so their presence in plays addressing AIDS should come as no surprise. However, my analysis of *thirtynothing* shows how combing these literary devices to tell memories coupled with moments from AIDS history can serve as centrifugal tendencies, effective in drawing in spectators who might otherwise show little interest in hearing and seeing another AIDS narrative, they suppose will end in tragedy.

[97] Dan Fishback, interview by the author, 15 March 2012.

In this way, Fishback prompts spectators to consider how ghosts of AIDS continue to affect us all—from our daily sexual encounters, to the cultural effects that we may be too young to even acknowledge without turning to the archive.

UP NEXT

The case study presented in the following chapter uses the 2011 Broadway arrival of Larry Kramer's iconic AIDS play, *The Normal Heart* (1985) to examine the political possibilities of ghost stories in AIDS mourning publics. *Heart* is the longest running play to perform at the much lauded, Off-Broadway Public Theater, but it didn't transfer to Broadway or film until 2011 and 2014, respectively. The timing was finally right for Kramer in 2011 as the thirtieth anniversary of the start of the AIDS epidemic occurred and same-sex marriage was ultimately passed by the New York state legislature. The Broadway performance was framed as a history play about AIDS and marriage equality. Yet, I argue that particular ghost stories within the play might better address the production teams stated desire to raise AIDS awareness.

CHAPTER 3

CONJURING AND REFRAMING AIDS GHOSTS IN LARRY KRAMER'S *THE NORMAL HEART* ON BROADWAY.

In January 2010, I visited AIDS activist videographer James Wentzy's apartment in New York City while on a research trip. His charming SoHo basement level home was unique in that sections of gorgeous, reclaimed wood paneling served as partitions which divided the large basement space into smaller rooms that contained his then 28 years of accumulated furnishings and mementos from a career as a photographer and later, AIDS activist.[98] Soon after the front door closed, he proudly told me that he'd been homesteading this space for nearly three decades. I didn't know exactly what that meant, and began to wonder whether Wentzy's home met New York City housing codes. Did the city even know he lived there? This added to the surreal experience of meeting someone whose AIDS activist videos I'd viewed periodically over the last five years. As I sat at his couch viewing newspaper clippings about AIDS political funerals that he gathered for my visit, my eyes kept noticing a framed triptych of a Hudson River pier piling. The pier itself is long gone, and the once erect piling now looks like short, spikey hair emerging from the river because some piles are vertical whereas others tilt or have sank into the river bed. James likely noticed how my focus gravitated toward this triptych, which led him to cryptically say the piling reminds him of the ghosts of people who died of AIDS. Some, but not all, of the ghosts he sees might be former AIDS activist friends. Seeing the

[98] Describing Wentzy's unconventional home may appear to be an invasion of privacy, but three years after my visit, the *New York Times* featured him in a human interest story which also mentioned his home address and unique relationship with his landlord. Sadly, the story also describes how he and his AIDS activist video collection were forced to leave so a jewelry designer could utilize the space. Fortunately, the New York Public Library accepted Wentzy's archival materials. See, David W. Dunlap, "After Chronicling History, SoHo Artist is Losing a Vantage Point," *New York Times*, New York Times Company, 27 May 2013, Web, 14 Oct. 2015.

twisted piles as the ghosts of dead people resonated with me on multiple levels. The comparison made sense visually because ghosts often exist within a liminal space between visibility and invisibility, much like the partially submerged thick timbers in the photograph. The piling that Wentzy photographed also produces a ghost- like aura because of their particular unsanctioned, ephemeral, and shadowy history. Previously, they held aloft the dank and dingy city-owned Hudson River piers, like pier 48 on Manhattan's West Side. Here gay men ignored city trespassing signs to secretly sunbathe in the nude or meet and have sex with other men. It's unlikely I would have made this connection, or seen the vestiges of the ghosts Wentzy sees, before embarking on my now nine year journey into AIDS activist and queer histories. The forces described in Chapter 2 which made AIDS activist and queer histories invisible to Fishback—the LGBT generation gap, systemic erasure of queer history and homonormativity politics—also hid these histories from me. As I learn more about Wentzy and his friends, and the cultures they created, I'm not just amassing knowledge; I'm discovering a repository of hidden histories or ghost stories. They're ghost stories not necessarily because many of these people died, but because their lives and cultural achievements are disavowed or repressed by dominant culture.

The more I research AIDS mourning publics the more I begin to see traces of the AIDS ghosts that Wentzy sees as he walks New York City streets. AIDS ghosts and their stories can also now be found in AIDS cultural artifacts like activist film documentaries because many of the proud and defiant activists alive and well in these films have since died of AIDS complications, making the films memorials to the dead. In Gregg Bordowitz's *Fast Trip, Long Drop* (1993), Jean Carlomusto, another famed AIDS activist

videographer, observed how 1980s and early 1990s films meant to celebrate AIDS activist victories and recruit activists, can instead trigger grief and symbolize mourning only a few years after their release.[99] At the time, the pace from HIV infection to AIDS death could be relatively quick, so the shift from vibrant AIDS activist to ghost need not require decades to occur. The 1980s era gay themed books I've checked out from my school libraries also offer signs of AIDS ghosts. Arizona State University's copies of Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* and *Faggots,* which I've used throughout this chapter, were once the respective property of Alfred O'Meara Romo, and Bj Bud, perhaps two gay men who gave their personal library to their alma mater after dying of AIDS complications. Had I not started this AIDS mourning publics project, I likely would not question their fate after seeing the medallions honoring their book donations.

Of course, in describing the traces of AIDS ghosts that I commonly encounter during my research, I'm using the term metaphorically to signify how the traces of actual people and the AIDS activist and queer cultures they created linger after their AIDS related deaths. People currently living with AIDS are also ghosts or specters according to sociologist Claire Decoteau because an AIDS "aftermath ideology" makes the material effects and ongoing trauma they experience invisible within the dominant public sphere.[100] Like David Román, Decoteau marks the 1996 introduction of protease inhibitors and scientists' attendant claims of AIDS manageability as the beginning of

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[99] I thank Ann Cvetkovich for alerting me to Carlomusto's observation about the mourning qualities of activist films over time. See Cvetkovich, *An Archive*, 205.

[100] Decoteau, 232.

AIDS invisibility.[101] However, other queer scholars like Lisa Duggan and Douglas Crimp see the turn away from AIDS beginning much earlier when gay and lesbian activists began advocating for marriage equality and the right to enlist in the armed services.[102] Unlike Román and Crimp, who analyze the effects of this invisibility in theatre and culture more generally, Decoteau's analysis is built upon ethnographic research with AIDS testimonial activists and their university and high school student spectators. In these public and sometimes performative talks, all the activists describe their experiences from their HIV diagnosis in the 1980s until 2002 as AIDS survivors. Such a narrative Decoteau convincingly argues glosses over the daily traumas which make surviving AIDS an ongoing, not a past, completed activity. Although a well-meaning gesture to combat AIDS stigma, Decoteau argues survivor rhetoric leaves spectators with the false impression that HIV/AIDS is a manageable condition.[103] In contrast, "Brad" is the only activist in her study to "spook" or "haunt" the students. When Brad reveals and *performs* his ongoing emotional and physical trauma he provokes an uncanny sensation in spectators. This response is elicited because the viewers have unwittingly accepted the AIDS manageability narrative that trivializes AIDS today. More important, Decoteau's interviews with these spectators—all of my generation or slightly younger—confirms we know little about HIV transmission and even less about the lived experiences of HIV-positive people today. The students' comments before the

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[101] Román, *Performance*, 49 ; Decoteau, 237.

[102] Duggan, 182 ; Takemoto, 88-89.

[103] Decoteau, 232.

presentations begin often betray their incorrect perceptions that the US AIDS epidemic is over or in the past.

Re-stagings of well-known plays featuring people with AIDS have the potential to simultaneously unseat end-of-AIDS narratives and make AIDS activist and queer histories visible. One play capable of achieving this task is Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* (1985), which is second only to Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* in terms of popularity and icon status. In my analysis of the 2011 Broadway production of *Heart*, I show how the production team used dramaturgical outreach, staging practices, and set design to transmit AIDS history lessons to people with little knowledge of the early years of the US AIDS epidemic. However, they only perpetuate end-of-AIDS narratives when they offer little or vague contextualization of the AIDS present and frame the production around marriage equality issues that have been historically blamed for diverting attention from the US AIDS epidemic. In contrast, I suggest framing the play around *doubly uncanny* AIDS ghost stories found within the play, like the unsettled debate about gay sexual norms, can both transmit an awareness of the AIDS past and present to younger generations. These stories are doubly uncanny because they contain accounts not often recorded by the dominant culture and present concerns or issues that are identical or similar to ones faced by people today. As Sigmund Freud suggests in *Das Unheimliche* [The Uncanny], both involuntary repetition and the resurfacing of hidden, secret, or repressed stories and events can provoke this sensation. More important, the effect of the uncanny sensation on spectators is similar to the effect of Bertolt Brecht's *Verfremdungseffect* [distancing effect] in that seeing how the US HIV/AIDS epidemic

continues unabated surprises or astonishes spectators accustomed to the "end of AIDS narrative."

The Normal Heart has been a play about ghosts and mourning ever since it premiered April 21, 1985 at New York's Public Theater. As of August 1, 1985, 12,062 US Americans had already died from AIDS complications, and many spectators identified with the characters' feelings of uncertainty, loss, and rage.[104] Kramer's predominantly autobiographical account of the early years of the AIDS epidemic spans July 1981 – January 1984 and follows Kramer's stand-in Ned Weeks, as he and a small group of friends start a social service agency to educate gay men about a new, deadly, and unnamed illness. The budding social service agency bears a close resemblance to Gay Men's Health Crisis, which Kramer and friends co-founded. At the behest of concerned physician, Dr. Emma Brookner, Ned implores the group to advocate an abstinence-only message to gay men until the illness' cause is identified. But, his colleagues are eager to safeguard their hard-won sexual culture and object. Other conflicts within the agency ensue when Ned's confrontational tactics—such as sidewalk protests and public outing—meet resistance from assimilationist-minded gay men. They fear Ned's approach—that is, to publicize the epidemic's mismanagement and castigate those responsible—will further alienate them from public officials and lead to added discrimination. A romance between Felix, a *New York Times* reporter and Ned is also added to illuminate how gay courtship and love is possible and contrasts popular stereotypes that gay men are interested only in frequent, casual sex. When Felix is diagnosed with the illness in 1982, his two year experience undergoing Brookner's

[104] Larry Kramer, *The Normal Heart* (New York: New American Library, 1985) 19.

experimental medical treatments reveals how unprepared scientists and doctors were several years into the epidemic. As spectators watch Felix's sharp decline in health and hear characters' horror stories of friends' and lovers' awful deaths, they witness characters' fears and uncertainties which are exacerbated by conflicts within the gay community, the media's failure to widely broadcast AIDS awareness, and New York City's abandonment of the ill. In this way, Kramer's depiction of the early experiences of people with AIDS serves to educate spectators about the early institutional failures of this epidemic, and it humanizes people with AIDS.

By the 2011 Broadway production, three actors who performed in the 1985 premiere and two of the men the characters were based upon had died of AIDS complications, adding another layer to the play's ghostly qualities. The idea for the Broadway production sprung from a May 17, 2010 staged reading benefit for the Los Angeles Gay & Lesbian Center's Jeffrey Goodman Special Care Clinic for people with HIV/AIDS.[105] An October 18, 2010 New York staged reading followed directed by Joel Grey (the second actor to play Ned Weeks in 1985) and then Grey handed the beginnings of the production to George C. Wolfe who directed the subsequent April 27, 2011Broadway premiere.

Modeling the spirit of the Los Angeles staged reading, the 2010 and 2011 New York productions and the Broadway tour to Washington DC all donated money to AIDS

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[105] Annually, this clinic offers free or low cost comprehensive medical care for nearly 1,800 people with HIV/AIDS. See: L.A. Gay & Lesbian Center, *Casting Complete! The 25th Anniversary Staged Reading[of] The Normal Heart* (Los Angeles: L.A. Gay & Lesbian Center, 24 Apr. 2010).

related charities and/or marriage equality proponents.[106] Instead of holding a benefit performance of *Normal* or donating a portion of the show's ticket sales to such groups, the Broadway tour to San Francisco's American Conservatory Theatre closed their production of *Normal* with a benefit reading of Dustin Lance Black's courtroom docudrama *8.* The play ridicules the logic of anti-marriage equality California Proposition 8 proponents, using their own testimony given in defense of the law. Proceeds from *8* were donated to the A.C.T's youth education program and California marriage equality proponents American Foundation for Equal Rights.[107] As I explain later, these donations were just one way the Broadway revival advocated for marriage equality.

REMEMBER ME!

"Remember me," the cry of one of the most famous ghosts in theatre history shows how remembrance, which is at the center of grief and mourning, is one way that the ghosts of AIDS mourning publics prod us to confront the past's continued effects on the present. As Freud explained, the gradual act of calling up and detaching memories is how one grieves. This process continues until all memories of the lost object are detached, allowing the bereaved to move on; however, more recent theorists like George A.

[106] The 2010 New York staged reading benefited the Actors Fund and Friends in Deed (Healy 2010). The Broadway production benefited a host of charities: Friends in Deed, The Foundation for AIDS Research (amfar), The Actors Fund, Human Rights Campaign, and Freedom to Marry. Arena stage held a benefit performance of the Broadway touring production for the Washington AIDS Partnership on July 23, 2012. See respectively: Patrick Healy, "A Broadway Welcome to *Normal Heart*," *New York Times.* New York Times Company, 19 Oct. 2010, Web, 25 Apr. 2013. ; Larry Kramer, "The Normal Heart," *Playbill*. May 2011. 30. ; Emilia Ferrara, "The Washington AIDS Partnership Joins with Arena Stage to Celebrate the International AIDS Conference," *Washingtonian,* Washington Magazine, Inc., 27 July 2012, Web, 28 Oct. 2013.

[107] A.C.T. American Conservatory Theater, *American Conservatory Theater Announces Cast for One-Night Only Staged Reading of Dustin Lance Black's Play 8* (San Francisco: A.C.T, 7 Oct. 2012).

Bonnanno describe grieving as an ebb and flow process with possibly no endpoint.[108] Of course, Hamlet's father's demand to be remembered, or grieved and mourned by his son, involves more than just the solitary psychological process that Freud describes. It has an added meaning and purpose as an order and spur for vengeance. Likewise, seeing and hearing the ghosts that AIDS mourning publics—like *The Normal Heart*—materialize are invitations to mourn our loss through remembrance, and to act.

Anecdotes from spectators who saw the 1985 premiere and reflect upon that experience later often describe themselves as grieving with or alongside the characters onstage. David Youse, who produced the 2010 *Normal* Los Angeles staged reading, reports experiencing feelings of terror, anger, uncertainty, and grief as he watched the 1985 production. As a 19 year old gay man, the production clearly resonated with him: "Watching the story unfold was [like] watching my young life play out in front of my eyes as it was currently happening. The actors on stage were talking about me. They were talking about my friends. At 19, I had already lost four friends to a disease that we still thought you might contract from kissing."[109] Every night during the Public Theater run it was clear to Joseph Papp that many young men found it difficult to cope with reminders of the loss and uncertainty that defined their lives. Papp explains how nightly some spectators were too grief-stricken to move: "Every night after the curtain, ten, twelve, or fifteen young men would sit in their chairs and be unable to move, absolutely

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[108] George A. Bonanno, *The Other Side of Sadness: What the New Science of Bereavement Tells us about Life after Loss* (New York: Basic Books, 2009).

[109] L.A. Gay & Lesbian Center, *25th Anniversary Staged Reading of the Groundbreaking Play 'The Normal Heart'* (Los Angeles: L.A. Gay & Lesbian Center, 17 May 2010).

stunned. And several other people in the audience, mostly men, would go over and sit with that person, put an arm around him."[110]

For men of this generation, the play is a continued reminder of their lost friends and loved ones. Kramer makes clear how the play is a memorial, in his letter titled, "Please Know," which was handed to spectators as they exited Broadway's Golden Theatre in 2011. As Kramer explains, each production of this documentary play resurrects the ghosts of the actors who played these roles and the men and woman whom the characters are based upon:

> Please know that everything in *The Normal Heart* happened. These were and are real people who lived and spoke and died, and are presented as best I could. Several more have died since, including Bruce, whose name was Paul Popham, and Tommy, whose name was Rodger McFarlane and became my best friend, and Emma, whose name was Dr. Linda Laubenstein. She died after a return bout of polio and another trip to an iron lung. Rodger, after building three gay/AIDS agencies from the ground up, committed suicide in despair. On his deathbed at Memorial, Paul called me (we'd not spoken since our last fight in this play) and told me to never stop fighting.[111]

Kramer later adds that four of the original cast members have also died, including Brad Davis, who originated the role of Ned Weeks. I quote Kramer's letter at length because the sad remembrances about his friends' deaths make the letter's introduction read like an

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[110] Kenneth Turan and Joseph Papp, *Free for All: Joe Papp, the Public, and the Greatest Theater Story Ever Told* (New York: Doubleday, 2009) 531.

[111] Larry Kramer, "Please Know," a letter to spectators, 2011.

obituary, and as a symbol of mourning, it makes clear Kramer continues to grieve.

Normal Co-director George C. Wolfe's view that the onslaught of 1980s AIDS deaths triggered a defense mechanism in which people couldn't grieve, mirrors Douglas Crimp and Joy Episalla's observations—presented in Chapter 1. According to Wolfe, the production finally allows people of his generation to grieve and mourn these losses. He explains how the production is:

> allowing people who lived through that time to re-experience it, and to *grieve,* and to release, in a way. At one point, there's a line that Ned says, which is, "too much death," and I think those of us who lived through that time there was too much death, and a part of us shut down in order to survive. And going back and revisiting it now — because it's a play and the structure — it's allowing a release that wouldn't happen otherwise.[112]

Implied in Wolfe's response is an assumption that the decreased frequency or pace of US AIDS deaths now enables his generation to finally grieve and mourn. Wolfe's reference to *releasing* grief through the *Normal* performance appears to model Freud's conception of grieving, and to contradict Kramer's perspective that his grief is unending. On the contrary, Wolfe's comments about releasing grief end with qualifiers like, "in a way," or feature references to the play's climactic structure. I interpret such modulations as evidence that he's referencing not the release of personal grief, but the emotions elicited upon witnessing the hardship and grief presented in the play, especially after the irascible protagonist's hard-won happiness slowly fades with his partner's gradual AIDS-related

[112] Kenneth Jones, "Playbill.com's Brief Encounter with *The Normal Heart's* George C. Wolfe," *Playbill.com*, Playbill, Inc., 21 May 2011, Web, 18 May 2013.

decline and show-stopping death. The epidemic produced other, inanimate losses, that these and now younger gay men also mourn. In Douglas Crimp's 1989 *Mourning and Militancy* he describes losing a "culture of sexual possibility," or a landscape comprising bathhouses, piers, backrooms, adult theaters, and taboo sexual behaviors. This loss would have been immediately palpable to 1985 spectators because they were in the middle of fierce mainstream attacks upon gay sexual culture, causing this culture to radically change or disappear.[113] Amidst bathhouses and sex clubs closing, and male sexual behaviors being proscribed, shamed, and feared, it makes sense that watching characters debate gay sexual norms would be a reminder of losses endured and yet to come. Of course, this culture was never really "lost" because people still engage in taboo sexual behaviors and public sex still occurs—albeit with fewer practitioners and places to have public sex. As Crimp admits, the AIDS pandemic has required that we modify these behaviors to fit a safer sex mindset. Adding a condom to the mix sounds like a simple alteration, yet safer sex practitioners' complaints of discomfort, necessary pre-planning, transmission anxiety, and lost intimacy make safer sex seem altogether different and unsatisfying in comparison.

As I explained in Chapter 2, younger gay men also report other AIDS-related losses such as lost gay forefathers who might have helped them better navigate a heteronormative world. Of course, gay men are not the only ones to have suffered loss as a result of the AIDS epidemic which has affected people indiscriminately regardless of

[113] Sensationalist mainstream news stories of men flaunting these restrictions without bathhouse monitors (employees) intervening and ejecting the pairs, soon followed. Health officials in New York and San Francisco soon moved to close the offending business. Legal skirmishes ensued—particularly in New York—but many of these businesses folded under the legal pressure. See Robert Lindsay, "Bathhouse Curbs Called Help in Coast AIDS Fight," *New York Times* 24 Oct. 1985: A19. ; Joyce Purnick, "City Shuts a Bathhouse as Site of 'Unsafe Sex,'" *New York Times* 7 Dec. 1985: 31.

ethnicity, gender, age, or class. However, *The Normal Heart* only reflects these other losses through the loss of young, gay white men in the 1980s.

AIDS mourning publics engendered by a theatrical text are just one example where a group of people, or a public, gathers—often in a theatre—to memorialize and ponder how our loss affects us individually and collectively. As many performance studies scholars have noted, performance has been a dominant method for communally mourning AIDS because the ritual qualities of performance allow us to witness, remember, and mourn this loss. The frequency with which these performances are enacted ensures new spectators "Never Forget." As publics, which are a forum for dialogue, they are the perfect venue for this reflection because of the many opportunities for dialogue between actors and spectators. However, producers, directors, designers and dramaturgs all make decisions that frame or determine how spectators understand the ghost stories these materialized ghosts expose.

HISTORY LESSONS

In recounting why they were motivated to revive *Normal,* the show's producers, co-director Wolfe, and Kramer all describe a desire to share the story with others. David Youse, producer of the May 17, 2010 Los Angeles *Normal* staged reading that precipitated the show's catapult to Broadway, explains his staged reading was motivated by two impulses: to mark the play's 25th anniversary, and to "re-tell the story that so many people were living every day."[114] Those involved in the Broadway premiere are more specific about their intent to relay this story to a more targeted group of people:

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[114] L.A. Gay & Lesbian Center. *25th Anniversary.*

young spectators. Lead producer Daryl Roth says she was inspired to produce *Normal* on Broadway after learning that two young friends of actor David Hyde-Pierce confessed they knew nothing about AIDS history before seeing the October 18, 2010 New York City concert reading.[115] More specifically, they knew nothing about early AIDS history as experienced by gay men and documented in *Normal*. This is not surprising given the systematic erasure of queer culture described in Chapter 2.

Wolfe and Kramer also have a keen interest in using the play to relay AIDS history to younger spectators, but for disparate reasons. Wolfe imagines spectators—particularly the "new crop of young people out there who are being foolish and reckless with their lives"—will apply their newfound knowledge of AIDS history in unspecified ways, and in so doing, reduce the rising HIV transmission rate among young people.[116] Alternately, Kramer wants to forward to younger generations his account of the early AIDS years in order to bolster and keep alive, his memory of this time. In an interview with *POZ* editor Regan Hofmann, Kramer explains, "I think it's so important for every people to know its history and [*Normal*] is a history play now as well."[117] In this interview, his Tony Award acceptance speech, and elsewhere, Kramer called the play, "our history," and his frequent invocation of the plural personal pronoun, our, signals possibly his fear that younger queer people see this history as irrelevant to their lives, or perhaps he fears that it might be omitted, or remembered differently by mainstream culture. *Frontline*'s otherwise widely respected twenty-five year retrospective *The Age of*

[115] Patrick Healy, "Life Lessons in *Normal Heart, New York Times* 24 June 2011: C4.

[116] Jones.

[117] Dennis Daniel, "You Gotta Have Heart," *Poz.com,* Smart + Strong, 19 Apr. 2011, Web, 16 Oct. 2013.

AIDS, which overlooks gay and lesbian people's early activist responses to the epidemic, is just one example to fuel Kramer's fear.[118] If young gay and lesbian people accept *Normal* as their history, it's more likely the actions of Kramer and his friends will not be forgotten. Thus, keeping their memory alive in future generations is one of Kramer's primary aims.

As my analysis of the 2011 history frame shows below, it's unlikely that the *play* has any relevant information about reducing the risk of HIV-infection for the young spectators Wolfe aims to reach. Since *Normal* ends in January 1984, the script cannot account for nearly twenty-six years of AIDS epidemic changes. Even at the play's 1985 premiere some information in the play—like the play's abstinence only message—was out-of-date and had to be supplemented with dramaturgical information in the Public's lobby. For example, in a scene set October 1982, Dr. Brookner claims condoms can't prevent the disease from spreading, but at the play's premiere, safer sex practices using condoms were already popularized and deemed effective at halting HIV transmission when used correctly.[119] Stressing the importance of correct condom use, teaching sex partner negotiation skills, and educating youth about, and how to access, Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP), would likely be information useful to Wolfe's young spectators, however, such later innovations in HIV-prevention were not developed or universally accepted when Kramer was writing *Normal*.

Younger spectators can be expected to learn much from Kramer's depiction of how a group of gay men built New York City's first social service organization dedicated

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[118] "The Age of AIDS," *Frontline*, Public Broadcasting Service, 30 May 2006.

[119] Kramer, *The Normal Heart*, 93.

to educating people about the burgeoning epidemic while the city bureaucracy did nothing but stymie such efforts. Through the performance spectators can also learn about how this organization's rise was made further difficult by fear, misinformation, privatized sexuality, and differing conceptions of the purpose of the gay community. Whether sexual expression is the sole reason for the existence of gay communities is a significant question Kramer poses and explores in this play. Contemporary spectators may also be enlightened by the differing views on early 1980s gay male sexual norms held by *Normal's* five gay lead characters. Finally, because the play ends soon after Ned Weeks successfully pickets the New York City mayor, the play's documentation of a nascent direct-action AIDS activist movement might be inspiring to many. Thus, when Kramer vaguely calls the play "our history," these are some of the hurdles and achievements I think he has in mind.

The production aimed to transfer this history to young spectators in a number of ways. Beginning May 26, 2011, the producers attempted to lure young people to the show by offering tickets for $30 to anyone born in 1980 or later. The "30 for $30" advertising ploy was retained throughout the month of June for all the five Thursday performances that month, representing a substantial savings from the $116.50 top seat price. Producers also offered discounted tickets to LGBT youth-oriented community groups such as the Ali Fourney Center, which shelters homeless LGBT youth and runs a drop-in center for them. An extensive talk-back series, an anomaly for Broadway, was also mounted by producers and featured a new guest following each of the twelve Tuesday evening performances. These talks all referenced AIDS history related or marriage equality topics. Because these talks were given on Tuesday, not Thursday when

youth could purchase cheaper tickets, it is questionable how effective they were in delivering AIDS history to the playwright's and producer Roth's preferred demographic. Additionally, they used social media popular with youth, such as Facebook, to attract these spectators.[120]

It's not surprising that the producers, director, and playwright would choose to frame *The Normal Heart* as a history play because it has always been a history play as theatre scholars understand the term; Kramer can claim the play to be representative of the past because it is based upon the experiences of Kramer and his friends, as remembered and sometimes dramatized by the author.[121] For example, scenes like the death bed marriage scene are fictional, and some events are aestheticized for dramatic purposes. Also, characters are sometimes composites based on multiple people according to Kramer's friend, GMHC cofounder, and inspiration for the character Mickey Marcus, Larry Mass MD.[122] *Normal* was a history play even at its April 1985 premiere because it ends in January 1984, leaving within the script a sixteen month gap in which rapid changes to the AIDS pandemic occurred. For example, by the time the play premiered it was clear the epidemic was affecting a broader demographic than the white, middle class, and middle aged gay men profiled in *Normal*.

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[120] Since 49% of adult Facebook users in 2011 were aged 18 – 35, creating a *The Normal Heart* Facebook page to advertise the production and relay AIDS history seems a wise way to harness the site's popularity with the younger demographics the producers aimed to reach. See: Keith N Hampton et al., "Social Networking Sites and Our Lives," *Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project*, Pew Research Center, 16 June 2011, Web, 3 Sept. 2013. 11.

[121] For an understanding of how dramatists and theatre scholars understand the history play label, see: Roger Bechtel, *Past Performance: American Theatre and the Historical Imagination* (Lewisburg: Bucknell U P, 2007) 15.

[122] Lawrence D. Mass, "*The Normal Heart*, a Generation Later," GMHC.com, Gay Men's Health Crisis, 25 Jan. 2012, Web, 24 July 2014.

The play was also a history play to 1985 spectators exposed only to sensationalist, paranoia inducing AIDS details in the mainstream media. Such coverage offered little or no information from the perspective of people with or affected by AIDS. In this way, the mainstream media's near blackout on early 1980s AIDS experiences is much like the current "invisibility" of AIDS today. As AIDS scholar Jan Zita Grover explains, this blackout began to fade only after it was certain HIV could be transmitted heterosexually.[123] Cultural and medical events in 1985 plucked mainstream viewers' AIDS fears further, and in turn, elicited their interest in the AIDS history that *The Normal Heart* provides.[124] Thus, Kramer's perspective upon the early years of AIDS was informative and eye-opening when *Normal* premiered in 1985.[125] To feed this growing mainstream interest in AIDS history and to keep the play as relevant as possible, owing to the aforementioned rapidly changing epidemic, the premiere production used a production concept that fused past and present in set design and dramaturgical outreach materials.

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[123] Jan Zita Grover, "Visible Lesions: Images of the PWA in America," *Fluid Exchanges: Artists and Critics in the AIDS Crisis*," ed. James Miller (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1992) 32-33.

[124] Jan Zita Grover provides a sample of 1985 events that unsettled popular understandings of who is at risk for HIV infection and sparked growing interest in AIDS information before and during the run of *Normal*: The March 3 FDA announcement that a test to screen HIV antibodies would be available in two weeks ; *Life* magazine's July 1985 cover story which proclaimed, "Now No One is Safe from AIDS;" actor Rock Hudson's shocking public announcement on July 25, 1985 that he was diagnosed with HIV and his October 2, 1985 death; School district's refusal to admit HIV-positive teen Ryan White because of fears HIV is transmitted casually. The FDA's HIV antibody test to screen blood actually heightened fears according to Grover because it underscored "the invisibility of infection" and raised doubt about a person's ability to visually discern HIV infection; unlike visual signs of HIV infection—like KS lesions—antibodies in a person's blood could not be seen by the naked eye (35). Additionally, the test was only partly reliable because it doesn't test for the presence of HIV, but HIV antibodies, which take time for a person to develop following infection. See Grover, 35-36.

[125] As David Román asserts, a poll showing spectators came to see the Broadway AIDS show, *As Is,* primarily to learn more about AIDS, can also be applied to *Normal*. See Román, *Acts of Intervention*, 61.

Eugene Lee and Keith Raywood's original all white set design, which featured superimposed 1985 statistics in black letters was one way the set provided the most up-to-date information, particularly regarding Kramer's claims of official and media neglect. [126] For example, one statistic changed nightly, gave the current number of people with AIDS in the US. Thus, Lee and Raywood offered current information that underscored the play's contemporary relevance and urgency. Statistics comparing newspaper coverage and funding for AIDS education within select cities also gave added legitimacy to Kramer's claim that certain papers were burying the AIDS story and the US and New York City governments had been underfunding AIDS research and education efforts.

The premiere's dramaturgical displays also helped connect past and present to further educate spectators about AIDS and motivate them to volunteer at AIDS service organizations. In the lobby of the Public Theater was a display and literature rack where spectators could find pamphlets created by a host of AIDS service organizations which contained current information about HIV prevention methods, HIV/AIDS education more generally, and the locations of service organizations. Here spectators could examine and take home information about AIDS created by the AIDS Medical Foundation, AIDS Resource Center, American Red Cross Home Attendant Program, Children and AIDS, Gay Men's Health Crisis, US Health and Human Services. Also located within the literature rack was an AIDS study guide created by the AIDS Medical Foundation and lists containing the names and addresses of AIDS service organizations where one could

[126] In the style of a Piscator documentary, these statistics compared AIDS media coverage in select US cities, compared funds devoted to AIDS education and services in New York and San Francisco, and identified AIDS milestones such as when the US National Institutes of Health commenced AIDS research.

donate their time or money.[127] Given Ned's advocacy for confrontational, direct-action tactics in *Normal*, it's surprising that I didn't encounter mention of similarly aligned activist groups in these dramaturgical materials.

The contemporary end-of-AIDS rhetoric combined with continuing changes in the AIDS epidemic require a similar bridging between the historical past presented in *Normal* and 2011 social conditions if the play is to have more than simple historical value to spectators today. One significant example of how the US epidemic is different today: unlike the white, middle-class, gay men profiled in *Normal*, Black and Latino individuals are currently the demographic hit hardest in New York City.[128] This also holds true for the under thirty year-old gay demographic that producer Roth hoped to reach. In the first six months of 2011, Black and Latino men who have sex with men (MSM) accounted for 80% of the New York City HIV diagnoses in the under 30 MSM category.[129] Today, people who become HIV-positive in New York are often poor, ethnic minorities, men who have sex with men, drug users, immigrants, or all of the above. Because the US AIDS epidemic is presented much differently in *Normal,* producers and the production team have a great responsibility to challenge end-of-AIDS rhetoric by presenting an accurate reading of the AIDS present alongside *Normal*'s representation of the AIDS past. However, as I show below, LA producer David Youse's description of *Normal* as

[127] "Audience Involvement at Public Production," New York Public Library Archive: Lincoln Center, 1985.

[128] Black and Latino individuals accounts for nearly 79% of the people living with HIV or AIDS in the five borough New York City region (Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan, Queens, and Staten Island). See: New York. Dept. of Health AIDS Initiative, *Ryan White 2012 Statewide Coordinated Statement of Need and Comprehensive Plan.* June 2012. Web. 2 Sept. 2013. 90.

[129] New York City, Dept. of Health and Mental Hygiene, *HIV Epidemiology & Field Services Semiannual Report*, Apr. 2012, Web, 27 Sept. 2013. 4.

telling a story so many people *were* living foreshadows the Broadway production's deafness to how the ghost stories might be framed to make them doubly uncanny.

David Rockwell's Broadway set, which memorializes Lee and Hayward's 1985 design, is one example of how the Broadway production's design concept placed it firmly in the longer ago historical past. His all-white set, composed of three large walls, uses 6,310 cut and raised letters to form brief phrases such as, "April 1983 SAFE SEX IS BORN. Michael Callen's pamphlet "How to Have Sex in an Epidemic" urges condom use." These phrases concern events that occurred only during the time period of the play. A collage of 1980s era photos and ephemera, the names of people who died of AIDS complications, and other digital images, such as a magnified photo of HIV under a microscope, were superimposed upon this background at different times during the play. It can be argued the design offers contemporary information about the US and global AIDS epidemics by showing throughout the play the names of people—presumably from the US—who died of AIDS complications, and offering a final, global tally of those infected and dead. The enormity of the loss is palpable when the list of 41 names given at the play's start is regularly added to during the play's action until all the flat surfaces in the theatre are covered in names. However, this visual reminder of loss tells us nothing about the circumstances of these deaths. Where, when, why, and how did these people die, and who are they? Including these details would require exposing US and global barriers to HIV prevention and healthcare and familiarize spectators with the struggles of HIV-positive people as they seek exorbitantly priced HIV/AIDS medications and try to tolerate their side-effects. As Decoteau explains, "the [US] American AIDS sufferer is no longer portrayed in the mass media, supplanted by stereotypical and Orientalizing images

of suffering Africans."[130] Thus, including the circumstances of these deaths—especially when they are US citizens—might be an *uncanny* experience for spectators convinced antiretroviral drugs and combination therapy have ended the epidemic in the US.

Much of the 2011 dramaturgical outreach also was brought in line with the producers' AIDS history emphasis. According to a calendar of talk-back presentations listing the presenters' names and the titles of their talks, half of these presentations referenced AIDS history topics. Of these six, four presentations view this history through the narrow perspective of an AIDS service organization such as The Foundation for AIDS Research (amFAR), Friends In Deed, Actor's Fund, or the Design Industries Foundation Fighting AIDS. With titles like "amFAR: 25 Years Making AIDS History," it is unclear whether these celebratory organizational histories provided a forum for how AIDS affects people today. No mention of current US HIV/AIDS social conditions by speakers Cynthia O'Neal and Anthony Rapp in their May 17, 2011 talk, "Friends In Deed and the *Rent* connection." Instead, in the edited, online recording of the talk, the pair offer anecdotes about how Jonathan Larson created *Rent* while Rapp relates his experiences as gay actor and man in the nineties.[131] Only two presentations—"(Re)Living History: HIV/AIDS and a New Generation" and "The United Nations: The Global AIDS Response: Past, Present and Future"—overtly pledged to discuss how AIDS affects people now.

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[130] Claire Laurier Decoteau, "The Specter of AIDS: Testimonial Activism in the Aftermath of the Epidemic," *Sociological Theory* 26.3 (2008): 241.

[131] An edited, digital recording of the talk back can be found online in "Friends in Deed: Talk Back at *The Normal Heart*," *Poz.com,* Smart + Strong, 24 May 2011. Web. 16 Oct. 2013.

Unlike the talk-back series, which combined the AIDS past and present in a limited way, Facebook posts by *Normal's* moderator failed to introduce viewers to the present realities of people with AIDS. Even AIDS history posts were rare; the few offered contained links to outside sources which contextualized this history. Frequently, postings advertised the production, educated viewers about the 1985 premiere, and advocated for the New York state marriage equality bill. The few AIDS history postings included either provided links to newspaper interviews and articles, or introduced cast members, like Joel Grey and Joe Mantello, and briefly described their past AIDS affiliated work. All of the AIDS history posts utilized popular, not academic, sources with inconsistent content. Some posts provided unique and little examined perspectives on the epidemic like out.com's "St. Vincent's Remembered." Upon clicking this link, a viewer is greeted with excerpts of remembrances taken from the habitués of a Catholic hospital located in a primarily gay New York City neighborhood during nearly two decades of this epidemic. Stories about a drag king Santa Claus visiting patients or patients having group sex in hospital beds provides a refreshing counterpoint to the struggles faced by the beleaguered *Normal* characters. Far more typical was Jacque Wilson's and Matt Barringer's promise of "30 Years of AIDS Moments." The duo present only a white-washed and reductive account that hones in on scientific discoveries made during the epidemic with little explanation of the epidemic's social and political context, especially as experienced by gay men. Oddly, Wilson and Barringer erase much of the history that *Normal* and its producers are eager to have us know or remember.

In Kramer's "Please Know," he provided a sustained analysis of the AIDS pandemic today, but this letter was the only dramaturgical material available to all

spectators in which this was done. Several of his comments regarding the rising number of HIV diagnoses in the US and the dwindling funding available for indigent US Americans to purchase life-saving drugs are well chosen to unseat popular perceptions that the US epidemic is stabilized and under control. Surprising too may be his sharp criticism of pharmaceutical companies which he describes as only interested in "finding newer drugs to keep us, just barely, from dying, but not to make us better, or god forbid, cured."[132] However, when he cites the poor funding and coordination of research for a cure, he only parrots thirty-year old arguments also found in his play. The letter that critics hailed as an "update" provides few concrete and specific details, possibly because the play's Broadway audience is so broad. For example, men who have sex with men again represent a majority of new HIV infections in the US, but Kramer doesn't mention how we (MSM) are specifically affected today. More remarkably, Kramer's letter—unlike his play which encouraged gay men to take steps to protect themselves via sexual abstinence—doesn't spur the letter's readers to do anything more than "know." It's a sharp contrast from the Kramer who once complained, "The play doesn't seem to make people into fighters. I want them to go out there and throw bombs . . . It doesn't make people want to stop the wrong; it seems to make them want to *manage* the wrong."[133] Perhaps Kramer the firebrand has been muzzled by the producers, or he's realized the limits of agit-prop theatre. It's also possible that he's simply given up trying to tell others what can be done. I do not mean to suggest that something as simple as "don't have sex" will be a panacea, and I don't blame gay men for their behavior or lack of knowledge.

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[132] Kramer, "Please Know."

[133] Quoted in Michael Paller, "Larry Kramer and Gay Theater," We Must Love One Another or Die: the Life and Legacies of Larry Kramer, ed. Lawrence D. Mass (New York: St Martin's P, 1997) 252.

Instead, I suggest that if we return to Kramer's original aim of educating gay and straight spectators about the current and *messy* state of the epidemic and encourage them to use that individualized, detailed information to take specific action, we might reduce HIV transmission rates and save lives.

The show's failure to bridge the historical past and present for young spectators is seen most easily in a special May 26, 2011 talk-back session Playbill.com magazine editor Blake Ross and *NY1* theatre reporter Frank DiLella organized to "discuss the impact the show is having on audience members who were not alive to witness the outbreak of the AIDS epidemic (or see the original play)."[134] To draw in younger spectators to see the show and this talk-back, *Normal* producers started the "30 for $30" discounted ticket policy with this performance and asked cast members Jim Parsons, Luke Macfarlane, Lee Pace and Wayne Wilcox to join the discussion. Parsons, Macfarlane, and Pace are also television actors, making them more recognizable to a younger demographic. All assembled on stage for the talk back were young, and with the exception of Blake Ross, out gay men. In this way, the talk-back participants mirrored the young gay male demographic producer Daryl Roth hoped to reach with the production.

With the exception of Luke McFarlane, who admitted he had read *Normal* in college, all those participating in the talk-back admitted knowing little about the play or AIDS activist history. For example, both Ross and DiLella attribute their AIDS history illiteracy to being born near the time *Normal* premiered at the Public Theater. Panel members' impressions on the show's contemporary relevance are a measure of how

[134] "The Normal Heart Beats for a New Generation," *Playbill.com*, Playbill, Inc., 18 May 2011, Web, 12 Sept. 2013.

effectively past and present has been bridged in the production, since all admit knowing little about this time period before joining the cast, or watching the play and reading Kramer's afterpiece letter. Not surprisingly, all panel members mimic the producers and explain the show as an AIDS and gay history lesson without also noting contemporary AIDS issues. For instance, Macfarlane explains how telescoping into the early years of the AIDS epidemic illuminated for him challenges gay men of the period faced, thus expanding his limited understanding of gay activism:

> What I learned from this is a clear sort of idea about what the gay rights movement was really about. I assumed growing up—for me—gay rights was kinda about getting married but then I had to think back to this moment when sex needed to be redefined between two men and men needed to be able to have sex and not be ashamed of it. The education that I really learned was that there was this moment when men really had to go out in the streets and be, "it's OK to kiss each other, it's OK to be with each other.[135]

As Macfarlane's comment shows, young spectators who have little knowledge of AIDS activist and gay history will likely begin piecing together and reflecting upon that history when reading or watching *Normal*. However, panel members' comments offer no evidence that the show forces them to consider or re-evaluate their understanding of the AIDS *present*. If the performance is not prompting actors to make this leap, it's unlikely

[135] A digital recording of the complete talk back can be found online in Gioia, Michael, "Playbill and NY1's Talkback with the Cast of *The Normal Heart*," Playbill.com, Playbill Inc., 28 May 2011, Web, 20 May 2013.

this is happening in spectators. In fact, after seeing *Normal* on Broadway one gay reporter under 30 admitted just as much when he said, "I think many of the ideas in the play will seem exotic and dated to a lot of gay men."[136] Significantly, the only time the AIDS present is mentioned in this panel discussion is when Ross reminds the spectators that 75 million people globally are infected with HIV and 35 million people have died. Oddly, the cast, moderators, and the gay reporter offer no reflections or insight into how AIDS personally affects them today. When Ross vaguely lists intolerance, not being accepted, healthcare, and marriage equality as some of the play's continuing issues, AIDS isn't even included.

The talk-back session culminated with a question and answer period that ended just as a young sounding female voice asked, "How do we fight harder?"[137] Actor Wayne Wilcox responded, "Talk about this, tell people, inform them and then produce the show somewhere else." It's unclear whether Wilcox wants them to talk about AIDS or the show, but earlier Ross and DiLella both encouraged spectators to urge their friends to see the show. As I've shown, *Normal* does an excellent job of historicizing the AIDS epidemic, but it seems the Broadway production framed it as an essential AIDS history lesson so much so that spectators were not encouraged to apply this knowledge to, and expand their understanding of, AIDS today. It may be that their exposure to end-of-AIDS rhetoric has been so complete that they have no concept of how the epidemic affects them, making them unable to see that the ghost stories materialized on stage do have

[136] Thomas Rogers, "The Problem with Gay Men Today," *Salon*.com, Salon Media Group, Inc., 23 Apr. 2011, Web, 14 Nov. 2013.

[137]Michael Gioia, "Playbill and NY1's Talkback with the Cast of *The Normal Heart*," *Playbill.com*, Playbill Inc., 28 May 2011, Web, 20 May 2013.

many more connections with the present than they can acknowledge. That is, they are unable to see that many of these stories are doubly uncanny.

MARRIAGE EQUALITY

Like the production's history lesson emphasis, dramaturgical outreach and directing choices were also used to lead viewers to believe *Normal* was an early argument in favor of the now ascending marriage equality movement. This frame appealed to the production team because rehearsals and performances of *Normal* occurred while legislation to legalize same-sex marriage made its way through the New York legislature. On the surface, the "marriage" compelled by Felix's impending AIDS related death relates the past as depicted in *Normal* to our present marriage equality debates. However, the production's claim that the scene is an early argument in favor of marriage equality is anachronistic and therefore weakens their aforementioned aims to relay gay history. As I describe below, queer activists began advocating in an organized way for marriage equality years after Kramer's 1985 premiere, so it is not historically accurate to claim the scene as an early appeal for marriage equality. Yes, a handful of same-sex couples did file for and then sue their home state for refusing to issue marriage licenses as early as 1970.[138] As I describe later, such rare instances were anomalies within gay culture which tended to reject heterosexual institutions like marriage. More importantly, the scene is actually a poor choice for such a claim because scenes immediately preceding this grand

[138] In 1970 marriage equality pioneers Mike McConnell and Jack Baker of Minnesota filed unsuccessfully for a marriage license to earn tax and inheritance advantages and public recognition of their relationship. See George Chauncey, *Why Marriage? The History Shaping Today's Debate over Gay Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 2004) 89-90.

finale actually undermine now classic marriage equality arguments which attempt to explain why the public and private benefits of this institution are needed by otherwise vulnerable same-sex couples. More problematically, the marriage equality movement's attendant history of overshadowing AIDS awareness efforts works against the production team's desire to spread AIDS awareness. Rather than promote life-saving ghost stories, the marriage equality frame further entrenches dominant gay and lesbian activist narratives privileging marriage equality at the expense of HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment.

As early as February 2011, Governor Andrew Cuomo of New York vowed to legalize marriage for same-sex couples before the 2011 legislative session ended in June.[139] Less than two weeks after Cuomo's announcement, *Normal* lead producer Daryl Roth also announced that her production had secured a Broadway theater and would be opening on April 27.[140] Since the drama of courting voters and state senators played out in news media at the same time that *Normal* producers began to publicize and rehearse the show, making marriage equality a primary issue within the production likely seemed like a no-brainer to producers. Less than two months into the Broadway run, late on Friday June 24, the Act passed the New York Assembly and was signed by Governor Andrew Cuomo.[141] This provided another reason to celebrate the jubilant 2011 New York City Pride weekend events that began that night.

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[139] See: Thomas Kaplan, "Cuomo Says He'll Push for Vote to Legalize Same-Sex Marriage," *New York Times*, New York Times Company, 9 Feb. 2011, Web, 20 Aug. 2013.

[140] See Gordon Cox, "Last-Minute *Heart* Transplant," *Variety*, Variety Media, LLC, 23 Feb. 2011, Web, 21 Aug. 2013.

[141] On June 14, 2011, New York State Assembly member Daniel J. O'Donnell introduced the New York "Marriage Equality Act." This act allowed same-sex couples to marry in New York State and it gave them

Once again, producers mobilized dramaturgical outreach—via Facebook and talk-back discussions—to frame the production as promoting marriage equality. Early in the advertising phase and until the bill passed, producers used their Facebook page to fundraise for marriage equality groups, educate viewers about marriage equality, and advocate for the bill. In addition, they provided updates about the pending marriage equality vote on their Facebook page with pleas for viewers to contact their senators. Tuesday talk-back discussions were another way producers made marriage equality a dominant issue during the Broadway production. Evan Wolfson, founder and President of Freedom to Marry, was the first person invited to speak during the series, so producers clearly saw marriage equality as a top issue. Wolfson's talk titled, "The Freedom to Marry In—and Since—*The Normal Heart*" established the play and its 1985 premiere as providing an early argument in favor of marriage equality. The co-founders of Broadway Impact, a group solely focused on marriage equality, and Brian Ellner of the Human Right's Campaign also gave separate presentations on marriage equality themes, making marriage for same-sex couples the top non-AIDS issue discussed during these weekly talks.

The Broadway production's staging added significant emphasis to marriage equality, particularly in the hospital bed, marriage and death scene that ends the play. As performed in the premiere and written in the script, Felix and Ned are unofficially wed by Dr. Brookner while Felix lies in a hospital bed surrounded by medical equipment, with Ned's brother Ben as a witness. Moments after vows are exchanged, and just before the

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all the rights and benefits the State granted opposite-sex couples. Additionally, the act gave religious organizations and clergymen the right to refuse to confer, officiate, or recognize same-sex marriages.

play ends, Felix's dying words spur Ned forward in his activism: "Don't lose that anger. Just have a little more patience and forgiveness. For yourself as well."[142] In the 2011 production, Wolfe removed the hospital bed and medical equipment required in the script, and had Felix stand center stage in a pool of overhead light. After Felix dies, his head tilts back and the light above his head quickly goes out. Showing Felix standing throughout the scene allows the pair to share vows while Brookner "officiates" and stands between them, mimicking the common wedding scenario that some gay and lesbian people are able to experience today.

Framing the deathbed scene as an early argument for marriage equality unwisely undermines the producers' aforementioned efforts to claim the play is historically accurate. In attributing a 2011 understanding of marriage equality to a 1984 world they falsify the horizon of expectations that Ned and his friends possess. At best, the scene can be interpreted as an argument for municipal domestic partnership laws which were so controversial that Berkeley, CA was the only US city to offer such protections to their gay and lesbian citizens in 1985. Reviews in gay publications like *New York Native* and *Advocate* did not mention the scene in 1985, signaling that marriage was not an aim of the gay and lesbian population, who were focused on a plethora of more pressing challenges at that time.[143] Despite isolated 1970s examples of gay and lesbian couples pursuing marriage, gay historian George Chauncey argues this was the work of a small

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[142] Kramer, *The Normal Heart*, 121.

[143] For example, nascent gay and lesbian national activist organizations emerged only in the 1970s and were focused on repealing sodomy laws, fighting to win custody battles for gay and lesbian parents, securing municipal non-discrimination policies, and fighting social conservatives. See Michael J Klarman, *From the Closet to the Altar: Courts, Backlash, and the Struggle for Same-Sex Marriage* (New York: Oxford U P, 2013) 23.

number of individual gay and lesbian liberationists, and not an organized or widespread goal of the larger gay and lesbian population. According to Chauncey, winning marriage for same-sex couples was not a widespread goal of activists until the 1990s after a lesbian baby boom and the horrors of AIDS taught lesbian and gay couples how vulnerable their relationships and families were without all the public and private benefits that a marriage license automatically grants. Also, the liberationist gay and lesbian culture, which critiqued marriage because of its deep association with patriarchy and monogamy, still had a hegemonic influence in 1985 as the characters in Kramer's play make clear.

Textually, the marriage equality frame also makes little sense. Throughout the play, Ned and Felix provide no hints that they intend to wed, making the final scene unexpected and unexplained. More important, the pair's experience in the play actually undercuts arguments that New Yorkers in 2011 may be accustomed to hearing marriage equality proponents say. For example, one common argument is that without marriage benefits, gay men and lesbians cannot do things as simple as inherit their partner's property or life insurance; however, late in act II we are led to believe *some* of these rights are easily duplicated. In the scene, Felix is convinced he is near death and worried his desire to bestow all his belongings upon Ned will not be posthumously honored. So, he brings his handwritten will to Ned's attorney brother, Ben, and asks him to transform it into a legal document. Ben quickly reassures Felix that his handwritten will awarding Ned everything he owns does pass legal muster. Ben also tells Felix that if he listed Ned as his life insurance beneficiary, the insurance company must honor his wishes. Thus, the scene seems to neuter the classic marriage equality argument described above.

Unmentioned and lingering in the scene is the larger issue of inheritance taxation which would drastically reduce the net worth of Felix's estate since the pair is unmarried.

Because the marriage scene ends with death, not happiness, it—and the entire play—have been criticized by AIDS and theatre scholars for depicting AIDS and gay relationships to always be death sentences. Since a test for HIV was not available during the time period of *Normal,* one would not have known then if one had the virus and was transmitting it to his or her partner. Character Tommy Boatwright realizes this dilemma when he says, "All right, so it's back to kissing and cuddling and waiting around for Mr. Right—who could be Mr. Wrong."[144] The relationships of both Ned and Bruce bear this out. The demise of Felix and three of Bruce's former partners offers little hope for survival to HIV positive people, and promises a miserable future to once happy gay couples. In this way, the AIDS death becomes simply a new iteration in a continuing tradition of gay and lesbian drama where the person with AIDS—like gay and lesbian characters more generally—must tragically die before the curtain falls. Dustin Bradley Goltz calls representations within this tradition "heteronormative tragedies" and explains that young people are inundated with cultural examples of gay people dying young or leading miserable lives. Thus, when Wolfe emphasizes Felix's marriage, he also underscores his death, and perpetuates the heteronormative tragedy. Since this death/marriage is enacted on stage in the final scene, the death of another gay man and ruin of another gay relationship is the last image all spectators see, including the young people Wolfe and producers aim to reach. As discussed in Chapter 2, this imagery is

[144] Kramer, *The Normal Heart*, 101.

suspected of increasing young queers' anxiety about the future, which in turn, makes them prone to self-destructive behavior.

Significantly, no reviewers of the 1985 premiere or Broadway performance used this scene as an opportunity to discuss whether marriage or rights accorded to wedded couples should be extended to gay and lesbian people. Only three of the ten Broadway reviews I consulted briefly mention the scene or "marriage." None of these commentators explain why the pair wed or what the public and private benefits of marriage might mean for gay couples then and now. The few 1985 mainstream critics who mentioned the scene in their reviews, described it as a manipulative tearjerker romanticizing the illness in the melodramatic vein of Dumas *fils' Camille,* or interpreted Felix's dying last words as Kramer's final self-serving attempt to prove that he had been right to advocate confrontational tactics all along.[145] 1985 mainstream and gay critics may have overlooked the interpretation the Broadway production team now insists can be found in this scene because many early 1980s gay plays featuring marriage among same-sex folks are comedies about mistaken identities, families pressing closeted gay men or lesbians to marry, or the thrill of transgressing this institution. Thus, 1985 critics and spectators likely wouldn't have taken Kramer's deathbed marriage scene seriously as a political argument.

Placing *Normal* within a marriage equality frame is also odd because many AIDS and queer scholars malign marriage equality efforts and blame this movement, in part, for

[145] Clive Barnes, "*New York Post:* May 4, 1985, Plague, Play and Tract," New *York Theatre Critics' Reviews* 46.8 (1985): 280. Marcia Pally, "Uneasy Morality in Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart*," *Advocate* 28 May 1985: 40-41.

AIDS “invisibility” within mainstream US culture.[146] Reviews by Jeff Lunden of *National Public Radio*, and Marilyn Stasio of *Variety* provide evidence that this blame is warranted as they describe marriage equality and inheritance as the signal examples of how the play is relevant outside its original context. Although each admits AIDS is still a concern, their comments reveal how the marriage frame further minimizes or overshadows the continued importance of AIDS today. Since the producers and the playwright all hope *Normal* will help end AIDS “invisibility,” it is incongruous to champion marriage equality and AIDS awareness simultaneously. Educating people about AIDS and how to prevent HIV transmission often requires frank discussions about taboo sexual behaviors and desires, two subjects marriage equality proponents never want to publicly discuss. Rather, these groups advise proponents to discuss gay and lesbian relationships only in abstract and non-sexual terms of love and commitment.[147]

GHOST STORIES ABOUT SEXUAL FREEDOM

In the previous sections I explained how the Broadway production aimed to make twenty-five year old *Normal* relevant for a younger 2011 audience; however, marriage equality and AIDS activist and gay history frames help obscure AIDS and gay themes capable of unseating the mainstream invisibility of HIV/AIDS today. Here I contend listening to and framing the play around its ghosts and their stories, especially as they debate the constraints of, and attempt to alter, gay sexual norms is one way to elicit a doubly uncanny sensation in the audience. Seeing this debate unfold on stage and

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[146] See Duggan, 182 ; Takemoto, 88-89.

[147] Molly Ball, “The Marriage Plot: Inside this Year’s Epic Campaign for Gay Equality,” *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Monthly Group, 11 Dec. 2012, Web, 19 Aug. 2013.

accentuating it through the use of dramaturgical outreach would be uncanny for spectators with little knowledge of the obscured history of safer sex and it would be doubly uncanny because young gay spectators in particular might recognize how this debate is unsettled today just as it was in the early 1980s. There are many doubly uncanny ghost stories to be found within the play such as the continuing debate about queer social movement tactics or the effects of the representational absence of queer ethnic minorities in the play and queer culture generally. However, I only focus here on how historicizing safer sex debates might satisfy the Broadway production team's interest in relaying AIDS activist and gay history lessons that could also prove useful in combating a rise in HIV infections among MSM. Particularly, I explain how underscoring ghost stories about an ethics of brotherly love, visible in Kramer's play, and in the safer sex campaign of Michael Callen and Richard Berkowitz could be put to good use to confront rising HIV infection rates among young gay men. A brotherly love ethic need not only be instilled in gay men. Rather, the ethic should be encouraged in all sexual relationships regardless of gender or sexual orientation. Before describing how an ethic of brotherly love can be emphasized, I briefly detail the contours of unsettled gay sexual norm debates as presented in *Normal*. Then, I provide examples illustrating how such debates continue today.

> EMMA: Tell gay men to stop having sex. […]
>
> NED: Do you realize that you are talking about millions of men who have singled out promiscuity to be their principal political agenda, the one they'd die before abandoning. [sic] How do you deal with that?

EMMA: Tell them they may die.[148]

In describing why it will be difficult to convince gay men to follow Dr. Emma Brookner's sexual abstinence advice, Weeks essentializes gay men as hopelessly sex obsessed and prone to rationalizing this behavior as a political act. He also foreshadows his struggle to alter gay male sexual norms when he asks Brookner, "How do you deal with that?" Weeks makes this obstacle sound daunting, but behind his many hectoring pleas in the play is an assumption that gay men can turn their sexual desire on and off at will. Never mind that Weeks's own transition from bathhouse denizen to monogamous love seeker was made possible in part by twenty years of therapy and the fear of an epidemic. In spite of this fear and Ned's no-sex appeals to others, he and Felix are unable to do what he asks of others. Judging others comes easy to Weeks because he doesn't see himself reflected in the faces of other gay men and he selectively recalls how heteronormative society shames same-sex intimacies and drives it underground. In advancing the no sex message, Weeks frequently pillories "promiscuity"—a frequent target of sexual freedom—because he's convinced it distributes disease, saps energy better used for civil rights fights, and makes lasting, monogamous relationships impossible. To Weeks, relationships seem impossible because gay sexual culture champions and provides numerous outlets for what he calls "careless sex." This criticism of careless sex and its effects on gay relationships is a frequent theme for Kramer and is more fully developed in *Faggots* (1978). Upon Felix's suggestion that "men do not just naturally not love—they learn not to," Weeks's goal to change individual behavior transforms into an aim to engender a cultural revolution. He aims to animate "a culture

[148] Kramer, *The Normal Heart*, 37-38.

that isn't just sexual."[149] However, the sexual component of the culture he imagines is a sharp departure from early 1980s gay sexual norms where a broad spectrum from monogamy to "promiscuity" exists. One gay reviewer derisively describes Weeks's limited prescription: "a world in which all gay men paired off in country homes to talk about Proust."[150] Notice they are not to have any wild romps in the country.

This pits Weeks against his social service agency colleagues, like Mickey Marcus, who accept either sexual freedom or gay male sexual behavior generally to be the defining feature of gay life. They have difficulty imagining gay culture being anything but sexual. Additionally, they refuse to tell other men how to behave. Without conclusive evidence that the illness is spread sexually, his friends find a no-sex message to be draconian. The play ends in May 1984 with both sides clinging to their views, leaving the merits and effects of "promiscuity" unsettled and the sexual norms of gay culture unchanged. Although, it can be argued that Kramer means for spectators to side with Ned's monogamous impulse because the play ends as Ned and Felix are "married."

Like a ghost, the unsettled debate over gay male sexual norms continues to linger today. A typical example is Tyler Curry's recent *Advocate* op-ed "Love in the Age of Headless Torsos" where he resurrects many of Kramer's now 35 year old arguments against sexual freedom.[151] However, "hook up" websites on global positioning system (GPS) enabled mobile phones, not bathhouses, facilitate sexual freedom, according to

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[149] Kramer, *The Normal Heart*, 116.

[150] Robert Massa, "T-Cells and Sympathy: Making Theater Out of AIDS," *Village Voice* 23 Apr. 1985: 110.

[151] Tyler Curry, "Love in the Age of Headless Torsos," *Advocate*, Here Media Inc., 3 May 2013, Web, 6 Oct. 2013.

Curry, by providing users with what he calls a “fast food menu” of profiles advertising photos of torsos, buttocks, and erect penises. Curry’s claim that gay men objectify and fetishize each other is a classic Kramer complaint first presented in *Faggots*. In this novel, Kramer describes gay sexual culture turning men into interchangeable, consumable objects whose appearance and sexual organs—not their identities of personalities—are all that piques another man’s desire. Aging *Faggots* protagonist Fred Lemish—another character modeled after Kramer—badly wants a monogamous relationship, but he claims few men can see how they’re treating each other, and even fewer can turn away from the allure of gay sexual culture. Similarly, Curry writes to convince gay men that monogamous relationships can work, but only if men refrain from the loveless sex he believes these websites promote. Like Kramer, he wants men to aim for more than a sexual connection.

Arguments that sexual freedom facilitates disease also persist. Seven months before *Normal* opened on Broadway, Larry Mass MD, the man Kramer admits was one of the models for the “composite” character of Michael (Mickey) L. Marcus, wrote a *Gay City News* guest column where he blamed “promiscuity” and declining condom use, in part, for a rise in HIV transmission among US men who have sex with men (MSM). The supposed return to high risk behaviors is then offered as evidence that health officials’ non-judgmental emphasis on harm reduction (a.k.a. safer sex) is not working. Mass claims we need a new HIV prevention model that places greater emphasis on admonishing people who transmit HIV to others and more honestly discusses how HIV-infection and treatment can lead to traumatic experiences. In addition, new gay behavioral norms *created and managed by* gay people are integral to his strategy.

Suggesting we tell others how to behave is a startling reversal for a man depicted in *Normal* as a staunch defender of personal and sexual freedom despite the epidemic. I agree that gay sexual norms need to be revisited to ensure their efficacy, but before adopting new norms, I suggest we reinvigorate the brotherly love behavioral norms visible in *The Normal Heart* and in Berkowitz's and Callen's "How to Have Sex in an Epidemic: One Approach." To young spectators it would be uncanny discovering how this ethic of concern for one's sex partners and, in turn, a larger community of lovers was a primary component in early safer sex principles. In contrast, contemporary safer-sex training often omits the history of safer sex and this original emphasis. When safer sex is discussed in schools—if at all—students are taught ways to reduce their *personal* risk but not encouraged to consider how they might pose risks to their partners and the larger community.

Richard Berkowitz's and Michael Callen's May 1983 safer sex manual, *How to Have Sex in an Epidemic: One Approach* provides one of the best examples of how the brotherly love ethic initially saturated AIDS activist cultures. The development of safer sex during the HIV/AIDS pandemic is a ripe topic for the Broadway production's talk back series because of its historical import and because the play rejects the possibility of safer sex, contradicting the experiences of many spectators in 1985 and today. Explaining this contradiction during talk-backs or in some other dramaturgical fashion is necessary. In the manual, the duo explains how certain sexual behaviors make disease transmission more likely. They also provide easy-to-understand, sex act specific recommendations for both the receiving and giving partners so they may reduce the risk

of disease transmission between them.[152] Each recommendation instills the virtue of brotherly love because the authors attune the reader to their partner's risk for disease as much as they make the reader aware of his own chances for infection. In this way, they prompt the reader to ensure both he and his partners minimize their risk. Concluding the pamphlet is a section on "Love" in which the authors make a final plea for brotherly love as indispensable during the AIDS pandemic. They explain the need for gay men to love other men is great because gay men are first socialized as men who are trained to compete with, and destroy, other men. Additionally, they fear an unintended consequence of gay sexual liberation's uncoupling of sex and affection is that gay men care even less about the health of their partners. Inspiring gay men to have affection and love for their partners, then, is built upon an assumption that people who love each other will exercise that affection by reducing their partner's risk for disease.

As dramatized in *Normal*, the social service organization that Ned and friends created was originally an all-volunteer effort built upon brotherly love. Although these men were clearly self-motivated by a desire to protect their health, their concern for other gay men can be seen in the organization's initial aims to educate others (via a newsletter and information hotline), and solicit donations to fund research and pay the hospital costs of indigent men. As Tommy Boatwright explains in Act II, Scene 9, the group later began offering services in patient's homes and hospital rooms with the help of over 600 active

[152] Although what causes AIDS was not known at the time it was published, the safer sex recommendations contained within Richard Berkowitz's and Michael Callen's forty page pamphlet, remain hallmarks of current safer sex guidelines. Published in May 1983 and written under the medical supervision of Joseph Sonnabend MD, the pamphlet was written for a gay male audience and sold at conferences and on consignment at bookstores. See: Richard Berkowitz and Michael Callen. *How to Have Sex in an Epidemic: One Approach* (New York: News from the Front Publications, 1983) rpt. in Richard Berkowitz, *Stayin' Alive: the Invention of Safe Sex, a Personal History* (Boulder: Westview P, 2003).

volunteers. Thus, these men and the group they created sparked a tradition where *some* gay men and their allies selflessly volunteered to help others.

The 1985 premiere built upon this tradition with “What you can do!”, a program insert with five suggestions for how to become involved in AIDS activism; each suggestion is a variation on one of three possible actions: volunteer at AIDS service organizations, foster AIDS education, or donate money to AIDS service organizations. For example, suggestion four nudged the viewer to “Volunteer your time to one of the organizations now involved in the research of AIDS, the care of its victims, or educating (sic) the public through the various AIDS HOTLINES.”[153] Accomplishing one of the first four suggestions required a short trip to a lobby literature rack described earlier where pamphlets about AIDS education and service organizations were located.

Even today volunteers are needed and the Broadway production could have better made spectators aware of, and connected them to, volunteer opportunities as a way to revive the brotherly love ethic. In the *Playbill* and on their websites the Broadway producers offer brief descriptions of, and the websites to, organizations serving queer and HIV/AIDS populations. These descriptions excellently summarize what the organizations are doing, but include no mention of how spectators could also become involved. Instead, a more assertive approach can be taken, much like the “What you Can Do!” 1985 premiere insert, where they hail spectators as people who want to become involved and provide easy suggestions for helping others.

Likewise the production’s Facebook postings and talk-back series could have been used to explain how AIDS activism historically modeled the brotherly love ethic

[153] “Audience Involvement at Public Production,” New York Public Library Archive: Lincoln Center, 1985.

and continues to do so today. This ethic is abundantly visible within all volunteer 1980s era gay activist groups like Lavender Hill Mob, Silence=Death Project, Gran Fury, AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power chapters nationally and worldwide, and the Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt. The playful work of many of these groups have become ghost stories since many of the groups' aims and achievements are poorly recorded—if at all—in mainstream accounts of this time. Focusing on their accomplishments and explaining how the brotherly love ethic undergirded their work would be in keeping with the production's history lesson objective.

Focusing on the internecine debates about gay sexual norms and how some men developed ways to protect themselves and their community without compromising others' sexual freedom--instead of ignoring frank discussions of sex as the Broadway production largely did—could provide an opportunity for spectators to see how an ethic of brotherly love was initially successful in driving down HIV transmission rates. Reinvigorating sexual norms undergirded by an ethic of brotherly love with minor alterations could possibly reduce transmission rates further today. Despite the seeming gulf between Weeks's and Marcus's views of sexual freedom, Marcus's defense of it contains the seeds for the communal norms that Mass seems to favor today. Near the end of the play, Marcus asks Weeks, "Can't you see how important it is for us to love openly, without hiding and without guilt? We were a bunch of funny-looking fellows who grew up in sheer misery and one day we fell into the orgy rooms and we thought we'd found heaven. And we would teach the world how wonderful heaven can be."[154] Although Marcus appears to be referring to carnal love, I'd like to suggest that he's also implying

[154] Kramer, *The Normal Heart*, 103.

that freely exhibiting brotherly love is an essential part of the heaven he experienced. We see this brotherly love in the safe sex campaign of Berkowitz and Callen, in AIDS activist groups, and in *The Normal Heart* as Weeks and his band of friends strive to educate and aid other gay men. When norms of brotherly love are nourished, they help bring about the gay culture that Kramer / Weeks endeavors to create.

CONCLUSION

The AIDS ghost, who is often silenced, excluded, or hidden is an indicator of unpunished crimes, unfinished business, or oversimplified, repressed or buried stories. Ghosts serve to remind us that things forgotten or buried long ago will continue to affect us unless we act now. They haunt because they want us to reckon with the past. Admittedly, there are few full length documentary plays like *The Normal Heart,* but there is a plethora of AIDS testimonial one acts and solo plays, which, in contemporary productions, all resurrect the ghosts of people now dead or tell ghost stories unfamiliar to many people in younger generations. Simply presenting these ghosts as evidence of AIDS history is not enough to counteract AIDS invisibility today because such history lessons don't simultaneously explain the AIDS present. Ghost stories about topics like gay sexual norms have the ability to bridge past and present because these debates continue today. When productions frame their productions around these ghosts and their ghost stories, they elicit a doubly uncanny sensation in spectators that can help them see the AIDS pandemic anew and begin to imagine and take steps to create a better future for themselves and others.

CHAPTER 4

SPURRING CHANGE THROUGH "PERSPECTIVE BY INCONGRUITY" IN US AIDS COMEDIES?

> If art is to confront AIDS more honestly than the media have done, it must begin in tact, avoid humor, and end in anger. . . . Avoid humor, because humor seems grotesquely inappropriate to the occasion. Humor puts the public (indifferent when not uneasy) on cosy terms with what is an unspeakable scandal: death. Humor domesticates terror, lays to rest misgivings that should be intensified. Humor suggests that AIDS is just another calamity to befall Mother Camp, whereas in truth AIDS is not one more item in a sequence but a rupture in meaning itself.[155]

I quote at length from Edmund White's 1987 *Artforum* essay, "Esthetics and Loss," because his prescription to artists responding to AIDS is a common foil in writers' rebuttals which affirm humor's power to heal and unsettle. Before illustrating the utility of humor in AIDS mourning publics, I first contextualize Edmund White's narrow view of humor, particularly his disdain for camp humor. In spite of his argument against comic representations of AIDS, a comedic spirit once flourished in AIDS drama. In this chapter I analyze Paula Vogel's *Baltimore Waltz* and Ted Sod's *Satan and Simon DeSoto* to show how this ludic impulse served as a survival or defense mechanism against grief. Dramatists of both plays wrote to work through AIDS losses, and when the plays are performed, they become AIDS mourning publics. In such venues spectators well-trained

[155] Edmund White, "Esthetics and Loss," *Artforum International* 25.5 (1987): 71.

to view AIDS as a melodramatic tragedy are startled to see the illness ridiculed and life while HIV-positive presented in absurd extremes. What philosopher Kenneth Burke calls "perspective by incongruity"—in this case, the juxtaposition of comedy and tragedy—produces sometimes uncomfortable and odd moments which in turn help challenge spectators' understanding of AIDS. Even in this "post-AIDS" or "post-crisis" era, perspective by incongruity is possible. Fewer people may be dying in the US, but HIV/AIDS stigma remains high and people with HIV continue to be viewed as tragic figures in many ways. In outlining White's opposition to comedy, and detailing the success of *Waltz* and *Satan*, I hope to motivate dramatists and directors to return to presenting AIDS comedies to spectators whose view of AIDS is ripe for modification.

In referencing camp humor as *Mother Camp*—the title of Esther Newton's path-blazing 1972 drag queen ethnography—White might appear to be drawing on the critical functions of camp which Newton alluded to in the title; however, he actually questions the efficacy of this critical power in suggesting Mom is already overburdened.[156] In the same point he also suggests camp would give the false impression that AIDS is not *the* disaster for gay men to address; thus, minimizing an epidemic which he describes in "Esthetics and Loss" as so impactful that it has led to the near extinction of gay culture.[157] With such high stakes, it would be a folly to utilize a variant of gay humor whose primary merit, according to White and Charles Silverstein, is that it permits "gay

[156] Newton created the title to simultaneously signify drag queens' matronly desire to mentor and make streetwise her audience, and to nod to camp's critique of the marginalizing effects of gender, gender roles, and heterosexuality. See Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, 1972, (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1979) xx.

[157] White, 70.

men from becoming too pompous or serious in discussing their problems."[158] As I describe later, seriousness, in the vein of tragedy, is exactly what White prefers.

Clues as to why White would oppose camp humor can also be found in his understanding of the comic form's early connection to gay counterpublic life. White and Silverstein reference this connection when they explain its widespread use was once "the byproduct of oppression, secrecy and self-hatred;" as self-acceptance increases and condemnation wanes, they assume, gays have less need to camp.[159] In acknowledging the form's secret origins, the pair join a scholarly consensus that camp was once practiced in the safety and secrecy of "enclave" counterpublic conditions, which Catherine Squires describes as "a 'safe place' to develop and discuss ideas without interference from outsiders whose interests may stifle tactical innovations."[160] It is the double entendre language of camp culture—which George Chauncey calls a "gay argot"—that permitted gay men to communicate secret meanings in private spaces especially, and in guarded moments, public venues too.[161] For example, one might camp to test whether a stranger comprehends the double meanings and in so doing, gain clues about the stranger's sexuality. That such language was largely inaccessible to gay men without training is made clear by White and Silverstein's discussion of camp in a book intended to introduce a gay reader to gay subculture's "own rituals, its own agonies and ecstasies, its own

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[158] Charles Silverstein and Edmund White, *The Joy of Gay Sex: an Intimate Guide for Gay Men to the Pleasures of a Gay Lifestyle* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1977) 36.

[159] Silverstein and White, 36.

[160] Catherine R. Squires, "Rethinking the Black Public Sphere: an Alternative Vocabulary for Multiple Public Spheres," *Communication Theory* 12.4 (2002): 464.

[161] Chauncey, George, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890 – 1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994) 286.

argot."[162] That is, they assume readers don't understand the form or its language and in turn, define and provide examples of camp's many meanings. Newton's book and Susan Sontag's treatise, "Notes on Camp," serve similar purposes for dominant publics.[163] Although scholars have noted the utility of camp humor when part of an insider address to AIDS activists and gay men with AIDS, utilizing the coded language of camp culture poses problems for White's project.[164] Since he is eager to counteract media representations of AIDS, it's clear he aims to reach a mixed audience of heterosexual and gay and lesbian people. Reaching this target via camp humor would be difficult if camp's coded language is not understood by all.

Exemplars of the humorless and tactful tone White prefers include his description of the US gay community six years after the AIDS epidemic's official start, and the photo sequence embedded in his essay: Duane Michals' "The Dream of Flowers" (1986). A deep sense of loss pervades White's reductive view of gay culture because he describes it before AIDS as "a society based on sex and expression" where sex was so pleasurable and engrossing that artistic goals mattered little.[165] After AIDS is introduced, gay bodies once naturally or artificially beautiful (via tanning, piercing and exercise) become

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[162] Silverstein and White, 16.

[163] Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," *Against Interpretation and other Essays*, ed. Susan Sontag (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1966) 275-292.

[164] For example, camp humor can be useful in entertaining and inspiring beleaguered AIDS activists and helping people affected by HIV make sense of their experiences. See respectively: Gregg Bordowitz, "The AIDS Crisis is Ridiculous," 1993, *The AIDS Crisis is Ridiculous and other Writings 1986-2003*, ed. Gregg Bordowitz (Cambridge, MIT P: 2004) 44-67; Daniel C. Brouwer, "Risibility Politics: Camp Humor in HIV/AIDS Zines," *Public Modalities: Rhetoric, Culture, Media, and the Shape of Public Life,* ed. Daniel C. Brouwer and Robert Asen (Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2010) 219-239.

[165] White, 69.

"feeble, yellowing, infected," making sexual behaviors other than masturbation both undesirable and seemingly impossible.[166] Even if gay bodies are not disintegrating, "People aren't on the prowl anymore, and a seductive environment is read not as an enticement but as a death trap."[167] As gay sexual culture collapses, gay men reluctantly retreat to the arts; however, even this is no refuge from AIDS as White fears the epidemic will completely wipe out gay culture.[168] AIDS' threat to gay men also lingers in Michals' photos, which he made clearer by including one letter of the word AIDS below each of the four photos in subsequent printings of the sequence. Above each letter is a photo of a shirtless, mustached, curly headed man who visually reads as gay.[169] With eyes closed to suggest he is either sleeping or dead, he rests his head on a glass table. His head and face can be seen in the first image, but in the last three frames the camera zooms in on his head, which is gradually obstructed from view by flowers. The flowers are what you might see in funeral arrangements (e.g. baby's breath, daisy poms, and cushion chrysanthemums). In the last frame all we can see is his nose, left eye, and curly hair. After the word AIDS has been completely spelled in the photo sequence, the gay man's body, where AIDS registers its material effects, has become hidden by flowers symbolizing his death.

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[166] White, 70.

[167] White, 69.

[168] White, 70.

[169] If clothed, he would be wearing 501 Levi jeans and a flannel shirt to complement his mustache and curly hair which read as mid-1980s West Village (Manhattan) gay clone. Like today, many consumerist gay men follow the same fashion trends and grooming patterns, making them look identical. In a tongue-in-cheek article called "Clone Wars," Michelangelo Signorile contrasts the accoutrements and grooming styles of the new (1990) and old (1980s) gay male clones. See: Michelangelo Signorile, "Clone Wars," *Outweek* 28 Nov. 1990: 39.

Although White never explicitly calls for more tragic AIDS representations, readers can infer this intention because his essay and Duane Michals' photo sequence bear the imprint of a Burkean tragic frame. A cognate to Aristotle's definition of tragedy, outlined in *The Poetics*, Kenneth Burke describes tragedy beginning with a transgression against social contracts / laws, continuing with an experience which tests the protagonists' emotional and/or physical strength, and ending with the atonement and expulsion of the offender to purify the larger collective. Since the collective bears traces of the offense too, the miscreant jettisoned from the community functions as a scapegoat. Inevitable and predetermined is the transgressor's path in this highly causal structure of "the offense, the sentence, and the expiation."[170] The inevitability of expulsion means the victim can't appeal for the pardon of an authority (God, fate, destiny). In an early 1980s context in which no HIV/ AIDS cure existed, and people routinely died of AIDS complications, the tragic frame provides a perfect screen for homophobic people who want to do nothing. They can and did argue that AIDS was God's punishment for engaging in homosexual behaviors.[171] As my analysis of White shows, gay men absorbed and unwittingly replicated some features of the tragic frame in their understanding of the AIDS epidemic.

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[170] Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 1959 (Berkeley: U of California P, 1984) 38.

[171] My inspiration for using Burke's "perspective by incongruity" is drawn from Christiansen and Hanson's analysis of ACT UP's use of the comic frame to counter their enemies' tragic frame AIDS explanations. They catalog numerous examples of the tragic frame being used to explain why AIDS sprung up in gay communities. See Adrienne E. Christiansen and Jeremy J. Hanson, "Comedy as Cure for Tragedy: ACT UP and the Rhetoric of AIDS," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 82 (1996): 160-161.

In keeping with the fatalism of the tragic frame, White describes artists possessing a "strong urge to record one's own past—one's own life—before it vanishes."[172] Gay men can only bear witness to their fate and be acted upon because only mainstream society has agency according to his reductive forty-year history of gay life: "To have been oppressed in the '50s, freed in the '60s, exalted in the '70s, and wiped out in the '80s is a quick itinerary for a whole culture to follow."[173] Although he never explicitly blames "promiscuous" gay men for causing and perpetuating the epidemic—as the media and US government did—he does imply that gay sexual culture and behaviors are to blame because he reports a prevailing view among gay men that sex other than masturbation is a "death trap" to avoid. Finally, when White references calls to tattoo or quarantine gay men he shows that some mainstream commentators are eager to scapegoat and expel gay men for their apparent transgression of normative sexual behaviors. This follows a historical pattern, White notes, as gay men were once relegated to mental hospitals or portrayed as the deviant "Rake Chastised."[174]

That tragic representation is universally understood and a serious treatment of its subject makes it White's ideal representational structure; however, other AIDS commentators have vehemently disagreed. Objections to tragedy surfaced, but for brevity's sake, I offer three strong challenges to its utility during the AIDS epidemic. First, as David Román observes, many AIDS plays in the early to mid-1980s utilized

[172] White, 70.

[173] White, 70.

[174] White, 69.

someone testing HIV-positive, becoming sick, or dying as a dramatic device.[175] That one or all of these situations often arise in such plays makes an HIV-positive diagnosis, illness, or death seem inescapable. Spectators witnessing such drama—according to the Aristotelian theory of catharsis—end up fearing that they also lack the agency to avert such a fate. Exacerbating fear is the last thing needed in an epidemic in which "heterosexual panic ensues in popular media" as early as 1985.[176] Second, the mainstream media often depicts gay life as tragic. In *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*, Vito Russo is among the first to exhaustively document how filmmakers between 1929-1981 depicted gay characters as bad and immoral before having them commit suicide or be killed before the film credits roll.[177] To underscore this fact he even includes a "necrology" appendix where he specifically lists how each gay character dies via murder, suicide or castration in the films he profiles.[178] Dustin Bradley Goltz expands this analysis to television and finds that serious drama and film from the 1980s into the early 2000s continues to represent gay lives as "heteronormative tragedies" where gay characters die or anticipate a miserable future to "solidify heteronormative correctness" and dissuade people from adopting a queer identity.[179] Third, by definition, tragedy does not significantly alter the status quo, a factor not lost on

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[175] Román, *Acts*, 237.

[176] Jan Zita Grover, "Visible Lesions: Images of the PWA in America," *Fluid Exchanges: Artists and Critics in the AIDS Crisis*, ed. James Miller (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1992) 28.

[177] Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*, 1981 (New York: Harper & Row, 1987).

[178] Russo, 347-349.

[179] Goltz, *Queer Temporalities,* 47.

Douglas Crimp who bemoaned a prominent assumption in 1987 "that cultural producers can respond to the epidemic in only two ways: by raising money for scientific research and service organizations or by creating works that express the human suffering and loss."[180] Arguing that both are ineffectual, Crimp advocated for art composed from an activist perspective that utilizes new forms, incorporates timely AIDS information, mobilizes spectators, and is presented outside in the streets, theatres, and spaces that the affected congregate.

If tragic representations have been overused to naturalize the marginalization of gay people and those affected by HIV, what is a better way to change mainstream views on AIDS? In 1989, filmmaker John Greyson suggested a good first start is to reverse Edmund White's views on seriousness and humor: "If art is to confront AIDS more honestly than the media have done, it must begin in humor, avoid tact, and include anger. . . . begin in humor, because humor seems appropriate to the occasion. Humor puts the public on fighting terms with what is an unspeakable scandal: death."[181] Greyson's suggestion that humor is an essential ingredient is in line with Kenneth Burke's concept of the "comic corrective." Comic corrective is an unusual label for Burke's critical perspective because he's not referencing solely funny or humorous discourse, although, such discourse can promote a comic corrective. Instead, he's borrowing a comedic spirit in which learning from mistakes through education, activism, or other means is possible. Unlike tragic frames where deviation from fate is impossible for the scapegoat, the comic

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[180] Douglas Crimp, "AIDS: Cultural Analysis / Cultural Activism." 1987. *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2002) 28.

[181] John Greyson, "A Response," *AIDS: the Artists' Response*," ed. Jan Zita Grover (Columbus: Hoyt L Sherman Gallery, The Ohio State University, 1989) 34.

frame "provides the *charitable* attitude towards people that is required for purposes of persuasion and co-operation" to make a better future possible.[182]

It is "perspective by incongruity" which facilitates the comic corrective. Culturally, Burke explains, we possess an "orientation" or a "bundle of judgements as to how things were, how they are, and how they may be."[183] In other words, an "orientation" is a reference frame or the collection of past experiences and teachings which help us to determine what to expect in similar situations. As I've discussed above, tragedy was the prevalent "orientation" in 1980s mainstream and intra-gay and lesbian AIDS representations. To unseat this tragic AIDS orientation we must juxtapose it with another orientation—like one infused with humor—which is unexpected, doesn't match, or is inconsistent with it. Because orientations are so well known, it isn't necessary to physically see a juxtaposition occur; we are so well trained in our orientation that seeing something which doesn't match produces a jarring effect as a result of its unexpectedness.

In some critics' reviews of Paula Vogel's 1992 AIDS farce, *The Baltimore Waltz*, we see how surprising the effect of perspective by incongruity can be. In such reviews it is difficult for reviewers to accept that those affected by AIDS should or could find the experience humorous. For instance, John Simon of *New York* magazine wrote, "But some subjects, such as AIDS and the Holocaust, are not laughing matters, and should be protected from the likes of Paula Vogel."[184] With less righteous indignation, Howard

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[182] Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes*, 166.

[183] Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 1954 (Los Altos, CA: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965) 133.

[184]John Simon, "Rev. of *The Baltimore Waltz*, *New York* 2 Mar. 1992: 57.

Kissel of *Women's Wear Daily* agreed that comedy and AIDS don't match; he explained, "The content [of *Waltz*] is, considering the subject, smart-aleckly and childish."[185] In the same vein, Jan Stuart of *New York Newsday* sarcastically chided Vogel for drawing "a bittersweet smile on the face of dying. Death is a Cabaret, old chum."[186] If some reviewers thought there was only one way to represent AIDS, others strongly disagreed, arguing that humor actually aided the representation of AIDS losses. For example, Michael Feingold of the *Village Voice* claimed the play's goofball nature doesn't trivialize or diminish the loss at the play's core. Rather, he credited the light, funny and indirect approach with allowing spectators to more directly approach the "harrowing emotions" elicited by the play.[187]

THE COMEDIC TURN IN US AIDS DRAMAS

Despite some critics' objections to using humor in dramas, playwrights' use of certain forms of comedy in US AIDS plays became so remarkable that scholars like Therese Jones and Noreen Barnes-McLain began to take note in the mid-1990s and described such plays as part of a "second generation" or "second wave" when they featured absurdity, the carnivalesque, farce, satire, slapstick humor, and surrealism. It's not that humor—particularly wit and camp humor—were absent from dramas of the first wave; "Unlike first generation plays, humor is not incidental but essential in second generation

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[185] Howard Kissel, "*Daily News:* Feb. 12, 1992, "*Waltz* a Dizzying Danse Macabre," *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews* 53.3 (1992): 38.

[186] Jan Stuart, *New York Newsday:* Feb. 12, 1992, "Sex, Drugs, Siblings Reversing Roles," *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews* 53.3 (1992): 35.

[187] Michael Feingold, "Looking Glass AIDS," rev. of The Baltimore Waltz, *Village Voice* 18 Feb. 1992: 99.

theatre," according to Jones.[188] Directors like Anne Bogart noticed a shift and described comedy as a key component of this turn too: "First generation, the disease has just happened. The playwright's obligation is to present the material, to present the facts, and mourn them, and mourn the situation. So they [are] very serious and very, very responsible … a second generation AIDS play … it's funny and kind of abstract.[189] Like Bogart, Barnes-McLain and Jones fail to offer a reason for this turn to comedy. Instead, each is content to periodize AIDS drama into waves or generations and characterize each iteration's attributes.

Whereas Therese Jones implies that Doug Holsclaw's *The Baddest of Boys* (May 1992) is the first second generation AIDS play, both Barnes-McLain and Bogart are wise not to offer a point of origin. Many AIDS dramas bearing the same comedic qualities Jones identified were produced before and after *The Baddest of Boys* premiered. Three earlier examples: Tony Kushner's *Millennium Approaches*—the first half of the two part *Angels in America: a Gay Fantasia on National Themes*—underwent a workshop production May 1990 at the Center Theatre Group / Mark Taper Forum; Paula Vogel's *The Baltimore Waltz* received a workshop production at Douglas, Alaska's Perseverance Theatre in October 1990; finally, Ted Sod's *Satan and Simon DeSoto*—the second draft title of his play *Crocodile Tears*—was presented in a workshop production at CalArts Theatre School in April 1991. Neither version of Sod's play received a full production before being adapted into the 1998 *Crocodile Tears* film. In contrast, *Millennium*

[188] Therese Jones, introduction, *Sharing the Delirium: Second Generation AIDS Plays and Performances*, ed. Therese Jones (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1994) xi.

[189] Anne Bogart, interview with Michael King, "Don't Call Me Avant-Garde," *Houston Press* 2 Apr. 1992.

Approaches premiered May 1991 at The Eureka Theatre Company and Vogel's *Waltz* premiered late January 1992 at Circle Repertory Theatre.[190]

COMIC IMPULSES IN US AIDS DRAMAS

Playwrights Paula Vogel and Ted Sod didn't consciously decide to respectively create an AIDS farce and dark comedy to snag spectators' attention via the surprise of Burke's perspective by incongruity. Instead, the humor in their plays stems from their own grief in response to AIDS losses. As discussed in chapter one, grief is not an individual emotion, but a syndrome or state comprising many emotions such as depressed mood, yearning, loneliness, anger, and even laughter. In an interview, Vogel reveals how the humor in her play is rooted in the grief she experienced after her brother Carl died on January 9, 1988. Vogel explains, "In my three weeks [at the MacDowell Colony writers' retreat] the play just came out. I walked around this little space and guttural noises were coming out of my throat. I was keening, and crying, and then I would start laughing hysterically, because the play was becoming a comedy."[191] Conversely, the humor in Sod's play, *Satan* stems, in part, from his 1989 HIV-positive diagnosis and subsequent fears about the uncertainty of his health, life, and legacy.[192] Like Sod, *Satan* protagonist,

[190] See respectively: Tony Kushner, *Angels in America, Part One: Millennium Approaches* (New York: Theatre Communication Group, 1992) v-vi ; Paula Vogel, "The Baltimore Waltz," *American Theatre* Sept. 1991: 1; Ted Sod, *Satan and Simon DeSoto*, *Sharing the Delirium: Second Generation AIDS Plays and Performances*, ed. Therese Jones (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1994) 143.

[191] Quoted in Elizabeth M. Osborn, "When it Hits Home: Two Women Playwrights Discuss AIDS," *Village Voice* 18 Feb. 1992: 100+. 100

[192] The press release to the play's film adaptation alerts reviewers to Sod's HIV-positive diagnosis as influential to the play's development and most reviewers cycled this information into their previews and reviews. See for example: John Hartl, "*Crocodile Tears* Finally Opens in Seattle," *Seattle Times* 5 Apr. 1998, Web, Access World News, 11 May 2015.

Simon DeSoto, is a newly HIV-positive playwright and teaching artist, making transparent to viewers that the play is partially based on his own experiences. Thus, it may be Sod who is expressing his grief over the possibility of an unexpectedly short life when Simon reveals his HIV diagnosis to a friend and rhetorically asks with disdain, "Is this supposed to be my entire purpose in life—to be a second-rate artist and die a miserable death in Seattle?"[193]

With the epigram, "To the memory of Carl—because I cannot sew," included in *Waltz* programs and published play texts, it is no surprise that Carl's campy and dark sense of humor also influenced this tribute in which Carl is also cast. Also included with this epigram is a letter Carl sent Vogel after his first visit to Johns Hopkins' Hospital to treat AIDS related pneumonia. In the note Carl offers "some of my thoughts about the (shall we say) production values of my [funeral] ceremony."[194] Amidst clear instructions on music, choice of clergy, and ceremony style, he gives Vogel five options for displaying his body, which in turn, expose viewers to his sense of humor and prepare them for Vogel's AIDS farce. Her five alternatives include:

1) Open casket, full drag.
2) Open casket, bum up (you'll know where to place the calla lilies, won't you?).
3) Closed casket, interment with the grandparents.
4) Cremation and burial of my ashes.
5) Cremation and dispersion of my ashes in some sylvan spot.

[193] Ted Sod, *Satan and Simon DeSoto*, 155.

[194] Paula Vogel, *The Baltimore Waltz* (New York: The Fireside Theatre, 1992) vii.

His musical selections also run the gamut from off-beat (the theme song to the campy and fantastic 1960s TV show "I Dream of Jeannie") to traditional / conventional (Gabriel Fauré's *Pie Jesu*).[195] Prefacing performances in this way discloses *Waltz's* biographical origins to viewers, but more importantly, it underscores how only a comedy could memorialize Carl's character and spirit.

The socio-political context of the early 1990s also shaped the comedic perspective and output of the playwrights, as Sod explains in a 2015 interview: "I don't think most writers set out to write something funny. I didn't set out to write a comedy about AIDS. I just wrote from my own worldview and it turned out some people saw it as a black comedy."[196] When writing the play in 1989—and further developing it into the early 1990s'—Sod's worldview was influenced by the "religious right's intolerance of homosexuality" and the threat of censorship via the "Mapplethorpe / Serrano / NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] imbroglio," according to an author's note accompanying *Satan's* 1994 play text.[197] Although both influences posed real threats to the lives and culture of lesbian and gay people, the farce and absurdity of some of the actions undertaken by the religious right is apparent too. Understanding this milieu will help explain why comic representations of AIDS became prevalent during the early nineties.

To demonstrate how Sod's twin influences might foster an absurd worldview, consider the April 1990 flyer, "Your Tax Dollars Helped Pay for These 'Works of Art,'"

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[195] Vogel, viii.

[196] Ted Sod, telephone interview, 29 Jan 2015.

[197] Sod, *Satan and Simon DeSoto*, 142.

which American Family Association's Reverend Donald Wildmon sent to all members of the US Congress and over 5,500 church leaders, Christian radio stations, and mainstream newspapers.[198] In a drive to cut all NEA funding and shame them for not censoring gay artists, Wildmon cut and reassembled on his flyer images taken from David Wojnarowicz's NEA supported "Tongues of Flame" catalogue and retrospective exhibit. The images Wildmon cut and pasted into a collage of his own making were grainy black and white close-ups of male couples engaged in anal and oral sex; these images were all small inserts in a series of larger photomontages by Wojnarowicz titled, "Sex Series." Wildmon didn't take credit for his flyer with a sexual image montage. Instead, a narrative accompanying the images attributed them to Wojnarowicz. Claiming defamation, Wojnarowicz fought farce with more farce by suing Wildmon and the AFA. The New York Artists' Authorship Right Act aided Wojnarowicz's case as it prevents one from altering, defacing, mutilating or modifying works of art and then attributing the secondary work to the original artist. In a welcome turn of events the judge ruled that Wojnarowicz had been defamed by Wildmon's violation of the NY AARA. In essence, the label affixed to the flyer's envelope, "Caution. Contains Extremely Offensive Material," was warning the receiver to beware of pornography created by Wildmon, not Wojnarowicz. In an even happier turn to this absurd event, Wildmon and the AFA were ordered to send a "corrective communication" to all who originally received the flyer,

[198] My understanding of this incident is drawn from: Richard Meyer, *Outlaw Representation: Censorship & Homosexuality in Twentieth Century Art* (Oxford: Oxford U P, 2002) 247-261. Also consulted: Wojnarowicz v. American Family Association, no. 745 F Supp 130, US District Ct. for the S. District of NY, 8 Aug. 1990.

alerting them that Wildmon's cut and paste handiwork was his own artwork, not Wojnarowicz's.[199]

THE UTILITY OF COMEDY IN US AIDS DRAMAS

In spite of White's concerns about how mainstream audiences would perceive AIDS comedies, it is commonly known that laughter is good medicine. HIV-positive gay writers such as Gregg Bordowitz, David B. Feinberg, Andrew Holleran, and Paul Rudnick all find much value in the laughter gallows humor can produce.[200] Also known as "sick humor" and "dark/black humor," gallows humor thrives among the oppressed, those threatened with oppression, and "People who live in absolute uncertainty as to their lives and property."[201] It also provides "socially sanctioned outlets for expressing taboo ideas and subjects. Where there is anxiety, there will be jokes to express that anxiety."[202] In joking about taboo subjects or ridiculing oppressors via irony, invectives, and sarcasm, gallows humor brings many benefits to the oppressed according to Dundes and Obrdlik. Such humor bolsters morale, relieves tension, expresses hope and wishful thinking and provides an intellectual and emotional escape from oppression. If gallows humor benefits those living under dire, oppressive conditions, its absence is a sign for concern as

[199] "Judge Orders a Correction," *New York Times* 9 Aug. 1990: C14.

[200] See Gregg Bordowitz ; David B. Feinberg. *Queer and Loathing: Rants and Raves of a Raging AIDS Clone* (New York: Viking, 1994) ; Andrew Holleran, "Reading and Writing: AIDS is Not the Only Thing Spread by a Virus," *Christopher Street* Sept. 1987: 5-7 ; Paul Rudnick, "Laughing at AIDS," *New York Times* 23 Jan. 1993: 21.

[201] Antonin J. Obrdlik, "Gallows Humor—A Sociological Phenomenon," *American Journal of Sociology* 47.5 (1942): 712.

[202] Alan Dundes, *Cracking Jokes: Studies of Sick Humor Cycles & Stereotypes* (Berkeley: Ten Speed P, 1987) vii.

Obrdilk explains its "decline or disappearance reveals either indifference or a breakdown of the will to resist evil."[203]

Dundes and Obrdlik's conception of gallows humor as a temporary escape from oppression mirrors writers David B Feinberg and Paul Rudnick's description of AIDS comedies as a survival or defense mechanism for those affected by AIDS. Feinberg writes, "Humor is a survival tactic, a defense mechanism, a way of lessening the horror. I would probably literally go mad if I tried to deal with AIDS at face value, without the filter of humor."[204] Rudnick agrees arguing, "Humor is most necessary in days of overwhelming despair" because "only laughter can make the nightmare bearable."[205] Both writers' views on AIDS comedies reflect not idle posturing, but their practice as successful AIDS humorists. Feinberg's dark comedic AIDS perspective can be found in his contributions to the AIDS zine *Diseased Pariah News* and his novels.[206] Similarly, Rudnick 's gay comedy of manners, *Jeffrey* (1993) is a satire of safer sex practices that had much success off-Broadway before being adapted into the similarly titled and successful 1995 film.

The plots of *Satan and Simon DeSoto* and *The Baltimore Waltz* clearly illustrate how dramatists like Sod and Vogel also employ humor to initially stave off grief due to AIDS losses. In Sod's play, protagonist Simon DeSoto avoids Western medical treatments after an HIV-positive diagnosis and seeks in turn, a "spiritual healer," a quack

[203] Obrdilk, 712.

[204] Feinberg, 87.

[205] Rudnick, 21.

[206] See for example, *Eighty Sixed* (1990), *Spontaneous Combustion* (1991), *Queer and Loathing: Rants and Raves of a Raging AIDS Clone* (1994).

AIDS conspiracy theorist on public access television, and finally, his homophobic boss and Satan's envoy, junior high assistant principal, Mr. Chessbro. Pursuing the occult's HIV cure appears to be a way for Simon to avoid deteriorating health and losing his independence to a caregiving former boyfriend (Carl), however, the three devilish tasks Simon must complete to become negative are so odious and alienating that Simon can never accomplish them. In this way, it is more an escape from AIDS than a reasonable treatment alternative for Simon to accept the Faustian bargain that he become a homophobic and racist stand-up comedian, appear straight to audiences by renouncing his sexuality and marrying his "faghag" best friend Lana, and lastly, stand by as Carl dies from AIDS.

In line with the Faust myth from which *Satan* is derived, Simon ends the play regretting and trying to break his deal with the devil, but to no avail. Ironically the stardom he sought as a playwright comes to him as a hate comic, but the cost is high. Becoming a bigot comic leaves him all alone after he loses his dignity as a gay man, Lana abandons him, and Carl dies ashamed of the man he once loved. The message to spectators: escaping AIDS at any cost can have consequences more severe than the disease.

An escape from the effects of AIDS is also cunningly attempted during Anna's fantasy European trip with her brother Carl in the thirty episode *Waltz*. In a masterful application of a circular plot structure Vogel borrowed from an Ambrose Bierce short story, Anna begins to fantasize about such a trip the moment Carl's doctor tries to tell her

that Carl has died of AIDS-related pneumonia.[207] Not ready to hear and process this news, Anna begins to fantasize that she—not Carl—is stricken with the farcical, equally deadly, and little understood, AIDS analogue: Acquired Toilet Disease (ATD). The European trip is Anna's means to acquire the non-FDA approved ATD cure of Dr. Todesrocheln ["Death rattle"], and a way to experience bliss instead of grief by making good on her post ATD diagnosis proclamation: "in whatever time this schoolteacher has left, I intend to fuck my brains out."[208] Naturally, the urine diet treatments prescribed by Dr. Todesrocheln and the black-market experimental drugs proffered by Carl's former college roommate, Harry Lime, are snake oil medicines.

The European escapade also functions as a way for the playwright to work through grief from her real brother's 1988 AIDS death. It is also a way to excise her guilt for not joining him on a 1986 European trip, the possibilities of which *Waltz* dramatizes.[209] Carl, like the real person on whom the character is based upon, is a polyglot and throughout the play he and The Third Man as narrator spur the monolingual Anna to learn the German, French, and Dutch languages by introducing words like *verlassen* ["to leave, to abandon, to forsake"] and phrases like *Où va mon frère* ["Where is my brother going"] or *Kunt U mij helpen, alstulieft* ["There's nothing I can do"].[210] Since the pair are busy having sex with strangers or separately doing other activities in

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[207] Ambrose Bierce, "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians,* ed. Donald T. Blume (Kent: KSU P, 2004) 9-16.

[208] Vogel, 9.

[209] An author's note in playbills and the play text make viewers and readers aware that Paula Vogel forwent a 1986 European trip with Carl because of the "pressures of time and money." Ibid., vii.

[210] The text provides all translations. Vogel, 54, 43, 1.

Anna's fantasy, the pair end up applying the language these exercises introduce, and in such experiences, Anna and Carl are offered a taste of the loss yet to come. The fantasy trip ends once Anna can withstand seeing Carl's doctor standing above his dead body and saying, "There was nothing we could do."[211] Anna makes this leap back to reality when she's in another doctor's office—Doctor Todesrocheln's—and listening to his crazed adulation to the medicinal properties of urine. Finally able to accept Carl's death, she runs to the hospital room where his corpse lies. Not entirely ready to leave her brother or the fantasy, she waltzes first with his animated corpse and then with Carl dressed in an Austrian military officer's uniform.

If AIDS comedies like *Satan* and *Waltz* allow dramatists to stave off and then work through their AIDS grief, does this mean that the plays are therapeutic only to the playwrights as some *Waltz* premiere reviewers suggested?[212] Some reviews of these performances provide evidence that spectators' emotions might be pricked too. Many reviewers applauded Vogel for seeking to empathize with her brother by creating Anna and the AIDS allegory, ATD. That is, the character and situation provide a means for Vogel to approximate what her brother may have felt. It's through this familial linkage that spectators might also be invited to empathize with Carl and/or Paula Vogel. As Greg Evans of *Variety* explains, *"*Vogel uses her allegory to demonstrate the universality of the love shared by this particular brother and sister."[213] Spectators whose love for their

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[211] Vogel, 79.

[212] Clive Barnes, "*New York Post:* Feb. 13, 1992, "*Waltz* Trips on Intentions," *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews* 53.3 (1992): 37 ; David Richards, "The Wink in *Happy Fella* is Still There," rev. of *The Baltimore Waltz*, *New York Times*, New York Times Company, 16 Feb. 1992, Web, 17 Mar. 2015.

[213] Greg Evans, rev. of *The Baltimore Waltz*, *Variety* 17 Feb. 1992: 77 ; Michael Feingold, "Looking Glass AIDS," rev. of *The Baltimore Waltz*, *Village Voice* 18 Feb. 1992: 99.

siblings is equally strong might also find themselves relating to Paula / Anna's grief upon losing a brother. Sod makes this empathetic connection more direct and personal when he "prods viewers to ask themselves, 'How far would I go to spare my life if I faced an imminent, horrible death?'"[214] Of course, for spectators who have HIV or have lost someone to AIDS, their personal AIDS griefs might automatically be triggered by Anna's loss or Simon's grief after becoming HIV-positive. In this way, each performance of these plays becomes an AIDS mourning public because Vogel and Sod publicly acknowledge their grief which spectators witness and, in turn, viewers are invited to recall, and reflect upon, their individual or imagined AIDS losses.

For even the rare HIV-negative spectator who is unaffected by AIDS, imagining the personal effects of an AIDS loss may spur more AIDS awareness and a genuine desire to end the pandemic. Vogel explains her hope that empathy might elicit social change:

> when you are so close to someone who is dying, you have such empathy that you imaginatively feel it is happening to you. I had a lot of dreams while I was taking care of my brother, and I actually experienced that sense of confusion. In a way, I think we all have to be afflicted through the imagination in order to do something about it. It is our failure of imagination and our failure of compassion that is contributing to the problem.[215]

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[214] *Crocodile Tears* (Seattle: Ted Sod/Crocodile Tears Productions, 23 Aug. 1996) 1.

[215] Quoted in Gerald Raymond, "Magical Mystery Tour: Cherry Jones triumphs in *The Baltimore Waltz*," *TheatreWeek* 2-8 Mar. 1992: 28-30. 29.

It's relatively easy for spectators to identify with and develop compassion for Anna because spectators have little belief the farcical Acquired Toilet Disease is a deadly danger to the pleasant, zany school teacher. For example, visual cues like Carl's hospital pajamas worn beneath a black blazer throughout performances of Anna's fantasy remind us that it is Carl who is ill. Conversely, identifying with Simon and his anti-hero qualities, like selfishness, poses a challenge for spectators who don't want to admit they would do anything to save themselves even if it meant sacrificing others' lives. Still, if spectators are able to breach this barrier they might reflect upon the play's moral that personal choices made in desperation can have ripple effects intolerable to both the individual and broader community. If tragic orientations maintain the status quo by expelling the scapegoat in an orderly, causal fashion, a comic corrective might show the reverse: the milieu around the protagonist is illogical with haphazard events and a threatening status quo. Both Sod and Vogel present such a reversal in their depiction of the absurdity experienced by people with AIDS. In particular, in *Tears* and *Waltz* the playwrights lampoon the purported expertise of medical professionals, the efficacy of AIDS treatments, and the safety of the straight world.

Vogel ridicules medical professionals' competence and knowledge from *Waltz*'s beginning to its end. We see this particularly in the actions of Anna's inept doctor. When telling Anna that she has ATD, he has difficulty relaying this news, hiding instead, behind the safety and authority of nonsensical medical jargon. Such jargon spews from his mouth even when prompted to slowly and plainly explain the news. His reluctance to speak simply is because he dreads the disease, fears how Anna might react to his diagnosis, and he has few accurate details to share because so little is known about ATD.

Although he may offer a diagnosis, he can't completely explain the cause or likely symptoms of the infection. Even more frustrating for Anna is his advice about prevention measures which, presented below, offers a perfect example of doublespeak, absurdity and half-truths:

> ANNA. I want to ask you something confidentially. Something that my brother doesn't need to hear. What's the danger of transmission?
>
> DOCTOR. There's really no danger to anyone in the immediate family. You must use precautions.
>
> ANNA. Because what I want to know is . . . can you transmit this thing by . . . by doing—what exactly do you mean by precautions?
>
> DOCTOR. Well, I guess you should do what your mother always told you. You know, wash your hands before and after going to the bathroom. And never lick paper money or coins in any currency.
>
> ANNA. So there's no danger to anyone by . . . what I mean, Doctor, is that I can't infect anyone by—
>
> DOCTOR. Just use precautions.[216]

The doctor's "guess" that the best precaution against transmitting ATD is to model proverbs about cleanliness illustrates how little is known scientifically. What's worse, his "precautions" and half-assurances adequately placate Anna's fears.

Medical doctors cannot be trusted in Sod's play, either. When Carl criticizes Simon's decision to abandon Western medical practices and turn to the occult, Simon declares Western treatments deadly: "AZT, ddI, and ddC all sound like pesticides—I'm

[216] Vogel, 8.

not putting that poisonous shit into my mouth."[217] Such poisons are also expensive, he adds. Faced with no reasonably priced and non-toxic Western style treatment option or cure, both Simon and Anna must desperately seek out experimental alternatives. Anna and Carl fly to Vienna to acquire Dr. Todesrocheln's urine diet treatments and other illicit cure. Likewise, Simon adopts the recommendations of AIDS conspiracy theorist Dr. Rook, purchasing a rectal ozone machine and writing to Satan for help. Everyone involved knows that such approaches are futile, including those who peddle them as this exchange between Anna's brother and black marketeer, Harry Lime, illustrates:

> HARRY LIME. I'll be straight with you. I can give you the drugs—but it won't help. It won't help at all. Your sister's better off with that quack Todesrocheln—we call him the Yellow Queen of Vienna—she might end up drinking her own piss, but it won't kill her.
>
> CARL. But I thought you had the drugs—
>
> HARRY LIME. Oh, I do. And they cost a pretty penny. For a price, I can give them to you. At a discount for old times. But you have to know, we make them up in my kitchen.
>
> CARL. Jesus.
>
> HARRY LIME. Why not? People will pay for these things. When they're desperate people will eat peach pits, or aloe, or egg protein—they'll even drink their own piss. It gives them hope.[218]

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[217] Sod, *Satan*, 160.

[218] Vogel, 69.

Blasting hot air up one's butt, eating peach pits, or drinking piss are clearly quack treatments; however, the playwrights' intent is not to ridicule people with AIDS for attempting futile treatments. Rather, both dramatists evoke laughter through camaraderie among people with AIDS and their loved ones who recognize the dearth of reliable treatment options doesn't stop one's hunger to survive. For spectators whose faith in Western medicine is still unshaken, such comments might produce a jarring effect as they witness other spectators knowingly laugh at how real this predicament is for some. Hopefully too, it leads them to ask why such Western medicines are so toxic, why few treatments exist, and why someone would need to leave the US to try them. If so, it would make such spectators begin to question some of the punishing policies of the US Food and Drug Administration.

PERSPECTIVE BY INCONGRUITY IN THE "POST-AIDS" ERA?

In 1995 playwright Ted Sod adapted *Satan and Simon DeSoto* into the screenplay *Crocodile Tears* which premiered May 29, 1997 at the Seattle International Film Festival. With no agent, only one film print, and working as his sole publicist, Sod remarkably succeeded in placing the film in 1997 gay and lesbian film festivals in Los Angeles, Palm Springs, Philadelphia, St Louis, Sydney and elsewhere. Additionally, in 1998 the film received respective three-week and one-week runs in cinemas frequented by the gay and lesbian communities of Seattle and San Francisco. Previews in gay and mainstream newspapers welcomed the film's many screenings with detailed synopses, but few critics issued follow-up reviews to assess the film's production values or AIDS narrative interventions. Those who did—like *Seattle P I's* Paula Nechak—praised Sod for

"avoid[ing] the sentimentality and well-trodden soft turf that usually infiltrates Hollywood movies about gays and AIDS."[219] Kevin O'Leary of *POZ* assessed the film in a similar vein: "An antidote to the sugarplum visions of PWA's chastely holding hands, this fresh retelling of the Faust legend offers dark humor and unpleasant truths."[220]

Unsurprisingly many mainstream film distributors balked at presenting the unpleasant truth of Simon's morbidity, desperation, and ironic view of life with HIV. Even prominent gay and lesbian distributor Strand Releasing passed on the film and told Sod, "no gay person wants to see this."[221] One distributor even offered him an insulting and laughable $1,000 contract in exchange for seven years of exclusive rights.[222] According to Sod, his difficulty securing even a gay and lesbian themed film distributor was because they are jaundiced by negative, mainstream film depictions of homosexuality and thus, are not eager to take on films that offer anything other than a positive view of gay and lesbian life.[223]

Distributors' fears that audiences (gay and lesbian spectators particularly) would turn against Simon for his antihero characteristics makes sense in light of a history of gay characters being demonized as criminals, lunatics, perverts, AIDS carriers, and suicide-prone. In addition, it is also possible that distributors feared spectators would be

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[219] Paula Nechak, "*Tears* Original Portrayal of Gays and AIDS," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* 10 Apr. 1998, Web, Access World News, 11 May 2015.

[220] Kevin O'Leary, rev. of *Crocodile Tears*, *POZ*, Feb. 1998, Web, Smart + Strong, 11 May 2015.

[221] Bruce Reid, "Distribution Deals: the Devil and Ted Sod," *The Stranger* (Seattle, WA) 9 Apr. 1998: 21.

[222] John Hartl, "*Crocodile Tears* Finally Opens in Seattle," *Seattle Times* 5 Apr. 1998, Web, Access World News, 11 May 2015.

[223] Reid, 21.

uninterested in the film because its 1997 premiere occurs late in the turn away from AIDS which I track in Chapter 1. Simon's obsession with staying negative makes AIDS a much more prominent theme than successfully distributed mainstream 1997 films featuring gay characters. For example, Joe Mantello's *Love! Valour! Compassion!*—a 1997 film adaptation of McNally's 1994 play—features eight gay men, but only Buzz and James have HIV. "Anyone who mentions AIDS this summer, it'll cost them [five dollars]" Buzz declares early in this drama about the relationship issues he and his friends face over three summer holidays.[224] It's a noble attempt to ignore AIDS' effect on their lives, but Buzz's morose attitude and James's deteriorating health make it impossible to focus solely on the play and film's primary focus: relationship fidelity, longevity and evolution. Ignoring AIDS as a subject matter was more easily done in romantic comedy which was the mainstream genre most apt in 1997 and 1998 to feature gay characters. *As Good as it Gets* (1997), *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997), *The Object of My Affection* (1998) and others follow a familiar pattern in which a woman's gay best friend aids in solving her relationship dilemmas. In these films AIDS is never mentioned.

Distributors may have also avoided picking up Sod's film because of the much publicized success of protease inhibitors which accelerated the turn away from AIDS and led some commentators to subsequently declare that "the twilight of an epidemic" had been reached.[225] If the conflict in *Crocodile Tears* is derived from Simon's belief that AIDS is always fatal, this conflict is undermined by the budding understanding that HIV

[224] See respectively: *Love! Valour! Compassion!*, dir. Joe Mantello, perf. Jason Alexander, Stephen Spinella, and John Benjamin Hickey, Fine Line, 1997 ; Terrence McNally, *Love! Valour! Compassion!* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995) 66.

[225] Andrew Sullivan, "When Plagues End: Notes on the Twilight of an Epidemic," *New York Times Magazine*, 10 Nov. 1996: 52.

infection “no longer signifies death. It merely signifies illness.”[226] Such treatment innovations were likely on some spectators’ minds during *Tears*’ 1998 Seattle theatrical release since an article proclaiming “Major Improvements on the AIDS Front” accompanied the *Seattle Gay News* review of *Tears*. Critics John Hartl of the *Seattle Times*, Bruce Reid of *The Stranger*, Deborah Peterson of the *St. Louis Dispatch* and Mark Woods of *Variety* also mention in their reviews, and draw their readers’ attention to, protease inhibitors’ life-saving qualities. Hartl’s review is unique in that he provides a near decade-long survey of Sod’s HIV treatments and traces the film’s development from its 1990 play beginning until its 1998 Seattle run. If Sod was “desperate [to live] when I wrote this play” and avoided poisonous AZT, now that Sod’s “been taking the new AIDS drugs, with good results, [he] feels that he has a future. ‘Mentally I’m not in the same place,’ he said, ‘because I have hope now.’”[227] In this way, Hartl’s simplified view of Sod’s HIV treatment and experiences mimics the post-AIDS rhetoric described in chapter one by celebrating science’s supposed AIDS triumph and personalizing, via Sod’s experiences, the relief it brought many.

Reviews of Signature Theatre Company’s poorly received December 2004 off-Broadway revival of *Waltz* also bear traces of post-AIDS rhetoric. In particular, critics see the production as a reminder of a time before efficacious treatment options existed. For example, *Gay City News*’ Laura Federico says the production “shows us how far we’ve come since the days when AIDS was an inevitable, and more or less immediate,

[226] Sullivan, 54.

[227] Hartl, “*Crocodile Tears* Finally Opens in Seattle.

death sentence."[228] As explained in chapter one, protease inhibitors' success as an AIDS treatment accelerated a turn away from AIDS and 2004 *Waltz* reviewers like Charles Isherwood normalize this insouciance in writing, "emotion surrounding the AIDS epidemic has inevitably cooled, as treatment has become more sophisticated and transmission rates among some sectors of the population have subsided."[229]

Sod's distribution difficulties and the 2004 reception of Waltz seem to suggest that the post-AIDS or end-of-AIDS rhetoric ascendant in 1997/1998, and later entrenched as the "routinization" or "normalization" of AIDS, poses a problem for plays and films in which characters like Simon and Anna pursue extreme treatments for an AIDS cure. If some queer publics and the larger public sphere believe we are post-AIDS, or accept AIDS "normalization," are farces about the lengths characters go to be rid of HIV only reminders of a more difficult and deadly time as Federico suggests? Or, can such plays speak to the experiences of HIV-positive people today? In the following I provide evidence that even today people view people with AIDS as tragic figures in spite of the widespread acceptance of AIDS "normalization." As such, tragedy still influences the dominant AIDS "orientation" making it possible for plays and films to utilize humor to generate the surprise and unexpectedness of a Burkean comic corrective.

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[228] Laura Federico, "A Sister's Lament," *Gay City News* 23-29 Dec. 2004, Web, NYC Community Media, 11 July 2015.

[229] Charles Isherwood, "Death-Defying Fantasy Fueled by Love," *New York Times* 6 Dec. 2004, Web, The New York Times Company, 10 July 2015.

AIDS AS TRAGEDY WITHIN AIDS "NORMALIZATION"

With the approval of protease inhibitors and combination therapy, US death rates did fall as predicted by post-AIDS and end-of-AIDS commentators. For example, 36,917 people in the US died of AIDS in 1992 (the year *Waltz* premiered) whereas 15,798 was the US AIDS death tally for 2004 (when *Waltz* was revived off-Broadway).[230] That AIDS may not be a death sentence for all appears to undermine our conception of AIDS within the highly causal Burkean tragic frame which forecasts inevitable doom for those who break social contracts. Burke's tragic frame also becomes less applicable during AIDS "normalization" in the US because the enemies of AIDS activists cannot be cast as inherently evil as earlier foes, such as Senator Jesse Helms, once were. Still, other aspects of the tragic frame are operative in US culture's current understanding of AIDS—such as the social contract transgression, an emotionally and physically daunting experience for the person with AIDS, and their expulsion to purify the larger collective. This suggests that a more generalized conception of AIDS as tragedy is more apt in contemporary US culture. Such an understanding is not without precedent because other scholars like Dustin Bradley Goltz also analyze how AIDS and people with AIDS continue to be viewed as tragic individuals in contemporary US culture.

I could detail in turn how US people with HIV today break social contracts, undergo emotionally and physically draining experiences, and are ostracized from the collective, but little knowledge of such experiences penetrate US culture. Recent qualitative studies by scholars Asha Persson and Claire Decoteau reveal that the public

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[230] See respectively: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *HIV/AIDS Surveillance Report, 2004*. Vol 16. Atlanta: US Department of Health and Human Services, 2005, 16 ; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *HIV/AIDS Surveillance Report, 1994*. 5.4 (1994). Atlanta: US Department of Health and Human Services, 1994, 18.

sphere is largely uninformed about AIDS, and relies instead on the fear inducing AIDS information relayed during the AIDS crisis years of 1981-1996. In Persson's study of Australian heterosexual people with AIDS she found even they were uninformed about HIV treatment advancements that could radically prevent their ability to transmit HIV to others.[231] Even after becoming educated about the 2008 Swiss Consensus Statement, for example, Persson still found many unable to allow this new information to supplant their understanding of HIV as hyper-infectious.[232] Mirroring Decoteau's finding that "AIDS signification is frozen in time," Persson also discovered that "the notion of the HIV-positive body as 'other' and 'infectious' lingers in the cultural imagination . . . ."[233] Both scholars credit 1980s public education campaigns with being too effective at leaving an indelible imprint on our cultural understanding of AIDS.

But why doesn't the contemporary stigmatization (internal and external), treatment developments, medical issues, and trauma of AIDS reach the US public sphere? Persson reasons that some demographics affected by AIDS lack the communal structures to allow an internal circulation of AIDS developments as they arise. Insouciance or the frequent publication of false miracle cures may be additional reasons why others have become "AIDSed out" and fail to note how life continually changes for people with HIV in the US. Or, we can blame the media's inaccurate AIDS representations. For instance, over a decade after protease inhibitors were released, Dustin Bradley Goltz still finds gay

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[231] Asha Persson, "Non / infectious Corporealities: Tensions in the Biomedical Era of 'HIV Normalization,'" *Sociology of Health & Illness* 35.7 (2013) 1071.

[232] Persson, 1072.

[233] Decoteau, 241 ; Persson, 1067.

and mainstream films and television shows using KS lesions, funerals, piles of medical bills and a plethora of pill bottles to signify AIDS illness and homosexuality.[234]

CONCLUSION

Regardless of *why* "AIDS signification is frozen in time," the present US understanding that AIDS is tragic—even though fewer people die of AIDS—allows us to once again utilize humor in AIDS plays and films to generate Burkean perspective by incongruity. Hannalore Williams briefly illustrates perspective by incongruity's potential in her webisode "Humor & Coping," an installment in her ten part documentary, "Dirty 30," in which she presents through interviews and very brief political commentary, a global understanding of AIDS thirty years after HIV was named. In this webisode raised eyebrows and disbelief are common interviewee responses after she first asks them, "What's your favorite AIDS joke?" The interviewees appear stunned that AIDS experiences could be funny. I often receive the same incredulous reaction when I tell people I write about AIDS comedies. AIDS as serious tragedy has taught people that there is no humor to be found in AIDS or AIDS grief. Yet, as Williams discovers, older men and women particularly, can remember Eddie Murphy stand-up routines or jokes which attempt to deflate the fear of AIDS with humor. As Reid, a 49 year-old gay man reports, "I don't think we tell AIDS jokes anymore in the United States. At least not in my community." Perhaps it's time we started purposefully exploring the humor in AIDS experiences again.

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[234] Goltz, 54-55.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: IN THE COMPANY OF "FUNERAL DIVAS"

> Because of my stature, writing, outlandish outfits, and flair for the dramatic, I became a known and requested presence operating throughout crisis, titled unofficially as, "The Funeral Diva." Called upon at readings, memorials, wakes [and] funerals, to speak. To give credence and testimony to men's lives even if they were not a family member or a close friend. . . . Like marksmen, having to execute small and mundane details all the while, like great actors or clergymen, having the talent to accurately portray and pay homage to the spirit of someone who lived only for a short time on this planet.[235]

Black lesbian poet, Pamela Sneed, begins "Funeral Diva"—a tribute to black gay poet Donald Woods—by describing her entrée into a seemingly ascendant black lesbian and gay literary movement. Woods, David Warren Frechette, and Roy Buchanan mentored and inspired her with their poems about black, same-gender-loving life. But, each of them died of AIDS-complications in the early nineties, stymieing the forward march of this poetic movement, and placing Sneed unwittingly in the role of Funeral Diva.

In some ways I consider myself a funeral diva after a seven-year study of how historical and ongoing AIDS griefs influence the US cultural present. It isn't that I've

[235] Sneed performed "Funeral Diva," an excerpt of a larger, unpublished work, at the public reading "AIDS & its Metaphors, which was held at New York City's Artists Space Books & Talks on February 9, 2015. A video of her performance can be found at: Alex Fialho, "AIDS & its Metaphors Reading: Pamela Sneed," *Visual AIDS*, Visual AIDS, 26 May 2015, Web, 25 Oct. 2015.

attended many AIDS funerals, or lost friends to the disease. Rather, I see a similarity in how I've become a repository for, and transmitter of, AIDS memories during my graduate studies—similar to how a funeral diva amasses memories about people with AIDS, and performatively relays them at funerals and memorials. When I began my studies at Arizona State University in 2008, I intended to focus solely on political funerals conducted by the New York chapter of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP). To help me contextualize these events I read widely about the time period and interviewed ACT UP activists Joy Episalla, Ann Northrop, David Robinson, Eric Sawyer, Sarah Schulman, and James Wentzy. In our talks they reflected upon and exposed me to their grief when relaying stories of courage, anger, humor, sex, and sadness. Three years into my PhD studies (2011) numerous play revivals, films, solo-plays, and art exhibitions appeared to mark the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the AIDS epidemic's start. Such reflections exposed me to further grief stories as artists examined the AIDS past and, in varying degrees, the AIDS cultural present. This newfound cultural interest in AIDS appeared to contradict earlier scholars' impression that AIDS was culturally invisible in the US after the much publicized early success of protease inhibitors in late 1996. With this moment upon us, I looked beyond my study of political funerals to study AIDS mourning publics more generally.

The core of what I call AIDS mourning publics is any text created in response to AIDS losses, and the manifesto, screenplay, play script, poem, or essay engenders an AIDS mourning public when it is circulated among separate people or, when the text is realized in a performance, film screening, or other event attended by an audience. In this dissertation, my conference presentations and published AIDS work, I function as a

surrogate “funeral diva” when I transmit AIDS memories and analyze how artists and performers: use performance to remember AIDS losses, work through their grief, harness that grief to attempt political interventions, and challenge the meanings of AIDS.

One might think that depression could result from my many years of funeral diva by proxy activities; however, it was AIDS activists’ resilience, sexual allure, creativity, assertiveness, humor, and strength which captured and inspired my imagination, not their sadness. Although popular understandings of grief define it as expressions of sadness, depressed mood, or despair, psychologists understand grief to be a syndrome of *any* emotion spurred by the experience of loss.[236] This broader definition of grief enabled my study of seemingly unconventional expressions of grief like AIDS comedies. It also helps legitimize as genuine expressions of grief, the light-hearted stories of fabulousness and wit I often encountered in AIDS remembrances. For example, Sneed describes poet Craig Harris as a tireless AIDS activist by day, “but in off-hours [he] was a true diva who drank champagne, smoked long Virginia Slims cigarettes between bouts of KS and pneumonia and trips to the hospital. And later, like a true rebel and pioneer, he vowed in one of his poems about AIDS not to succumb gently but insisted defiantly to go out like a fucking meteor.” Sneed also describes Harris’s retort to anyone who opposed his Harlem AIDS work; “he said, humorously in gay slang, “Honey I got a few bricks in my pocketbook and I am not afraid to throw.”

Humor is an integral part of being a funeral diva as the name and Sneed’s many jovial remembrances suggest. In this dissertation, I explained how playwrights Ted Sod, Paula Vogel and others in the early 1990s also viewed comedy as an essential survival or

[236] Margaret S Stroebe et al., 5.

defense mechanism for those affected by AIDS. A concrete example of humor used this way is the *Crocodile Tears* funeral scene in which two drag queens in large, white beehive wigs and exposed red dress hoops, lip sync and dance to Pussey Tourette's campy song, "I Think He's Gay." They are the opening act for Wade Hiske's funeral, which was spurred by the HIV-positive drag queen's suicide. As a reminder that the performance masks more dour manifestations of grief, the clip cuts to scenes in which Hiske's best friend reads his suicide note and first sees his broken body on the pavement. The performance is a fitting way to queer memorial practices, honor a fallen drag queen, and keep her bereaved audience from crying. But, as Sod shows in this scene, humor can be put to other uses too. For spectators primed to view AIDS as a melodramatic tragedy, seeing this drag performance at a funeral may seem shocking, irreverent, and indecorous. However, in moments when comedy and tragedy are juxtaposed, viewers' understanding of AIDS and the people affected by the epidemic is malleable. Although AIDS comedies and humor have become less visible, I argue our lack of familiarity with AIDS humor makes it an ideal genre to revive and renew spectators' interest in the effects of this epidemic.

How mainstream and queer spectators' participation in AIDS mourning publics affects their understanding of AIDS is a primary focus in my three case studies examining AIDS comedies, ghost stories, and history lessons. Ghost stories found in a play—or AIDS memories disavowed or repressed by the dominant culture—can also astonish spectators when the ghost stories amplified resemble issues or concerns we still face today. In my chapters I offer a dramaturgy of mourning and counterpublicity in US AIDS drama and solo performance in hopes that theatre artists producing AIDS themed

plays might use my analysis to better unsettle spectators as a way to invite them to reconsider what they know about AIDS.

This is an important intervention because of a pervasive cultural AIDS amnesia exists. The news media's occasional stories about HIV cures or treatment innovations on the horizon feed this amnesia because it forwards an assumption that a medical breakthrough is imminent. In training readers to focus upon the future, such stories omit and normalize the cultural invisibility of the AIDS present. While researching this project I've read about so many supposed breakthroughs that I wouldn't be surprised if their combined effect leads some people to think an HIV cure has been found. When reporters do cover the AIDS present, it is rare for them to tell the story completely. For instance, in July 2012 the US Federal Drug Administration approved the daily consumption of a single antiretroviral tablet as a means for HIV-negative people to avoid acquiring the virus in sexual encounters.[237] But, child star and newly minted AIDS activist Danny Pintauro explains that incomplete information about this antiretroviral, known as PrEP and marketed as Truvada, is often disseminated.

> So the conversation with PrEP is not simply, 'If you take this regularly your chances of getting HIV are very slim.' [Instead it must be,] 'If you take this regularly your chances [of getting HIV] are slim, but you still need to do the following things in a sexual environment, or you're gonna end up with something else.' That's the whole sentence with PrEP and no one's necessarily giving the

[237] Matthew Perrone, "FDA Approves First Pill to Help Prevent HIV," *Seattle Times*, The Seattle Times Company, 17 July 2012, Web, 21 Oct 2015.

full sentence. You gotta give the whole sentence. And, that sentence also includes, 'If you don't take it regularly, you're just as at risk as you were before.'[238]

Our incomplete understanding of AIDS extends beyond treatments to include AIDS history which is often whitewashed. Pamela Sneed's "Funeral Diva" performance is more than a tribute to lost friends. It's also a tribute to the black gay writing collective and publishing house, "Other Countries," which formed in 1986 and whose members nurtured her poetry. Many "Other Countries" founders died of AIDS and their poetry is quickly disappearing too. The collectives' first two anthologies, *Black Gay Voices* (1988) and *Sojourner: Black Gay Voices in the Age of AIDS* (1993), are missing from the libraries of Arizona's three public research universities, for example. I didn't know about Other Countries until I saw Sneed's "Funeral Diva," so her performance achieves one aim of AIDS mourning publics in that sharing her grief through performance becomes a means to transmit AIDS history intergenerationaly.

As I argue in this dissertation, a queer generation gap—triggered, in part, by a missing generation lost to AIDS related illnesses—makes such intergenerational transfer difficult. In different ways my case studies analyze efforts to bridge this gap and transfer these vital stories. Throughout this analysis my position is that excavating and (present)ing the past within mourning publics can be revelatory for young queer people, especially when queer people seen on television, film, and in other media are predominately white, middle-class, apolitical, consumerist gay men and lesbians.[239]

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[238] Tyler Curry, "Danny Pintauro's One-on-One with HIV Equal," *HIV Equal*, World Health Clinicians, 9 Oct. 2015, Web, 25 Oct. 2015.

[239] Gust A. Yep, and John P. Elia, "Racialized Masculinities and the New Homonormativity in LOGO's Noah's Arc," *Journal of Homosexuality* 59.7 (2012): 890- 911.

Consider how eye-opening it might be for a young, gay black man to see Sneed's performance and then read stories by men like him after locating a copy of *Black Gay Voices,* for instance.

Throughout this dissertation I provide examples of how AIDS memories and ghosts can be summoned to remind and encourage us to intervene in our current "post-AIDS" climate. One thing I don't do in detail is question the motives and consequences of funeral divas who conjure these ghosts for other means. To illustrate, on March 21, 2015 Bradford Nordeen and Clara López of Dirty Looks presented in Los Angeles, twenty-four hours of late 1960s to early 1970s gay and lesbian erotica in "Sesión Continua: a porn theatre in Echo Park." Spectators entered the impromptu porn theatre not from the storefront, but from the side alley where a flickering green light indicated the entrance. Some of the gay bars I entered in my early twenties had alley entrances and blackened windows too, but the purpose was to protect the privacy of a closeted clientele, not elicit in viewers an experience of hollow transgression. Since 2010 Dirty Looks has screened other historical gay and lesbian films, and ones by up and coming filmmakers, in former bathhouses, bars, and other queer spaces in New York and Los Angeles. I applaud their efforts to highlight for spectators a queer lineage in film, and I appreciate their aim to promote a queer sociality outside bar culture, but their curatorial style and performance spaces appear to romanticize and idealize a queer past profoundly shaped by shame, secrecy, and fear. As I show in my analysis of Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart*, the temptation to hold up only memories which affirm our present is great. However, the ghosts which point to the many ways we continue to hurt must be allowed to speak too.

As artists and curators continue mining the AIDS past, and the queer past more generally, how and why they intervene, and what effects their interventions have, will require further careful study.

I hope that I will see an HIV-cure in my lifetime. Although, even if one were to be found tomorrow, the AIDS grief that Sneed, and you, and I, have experienced might always be a part of us. The final moments of Sneed's "Funeral Diva" help underscore this point. To help us understand how important Donald Woods is to her, she compares her meeting him to the time Alex Haley finally met his African decedents in *Roots*. To ensure we understand the weight of this encounter she describes in detail Haley's reunion—as depicted in the book's final chapter.[240] In mentioning that Haley made this reunion a lifetime pursuit, she draws out for viewers the encounter's significance. Our sense of anticipation is heightened further when dramatic details are added, like his boat deck approach while his cousins are gathered on-shore. Her hands then fly above her head and wave about in triumph, as she relays how Haley sees them in the distance and screams in exhilaration, "I've found you. I've finally found you." She ends her description of the scene by bringing her hands to her side and describing how Haley advances up the shore and embraces his family for the first time. The excitement of the scene immediately deflates when Sneed quietly refocuses the comparison upon herself and Woods by adding, "This family was who poet Donald Woods was to me." Donald Woods died June 25, 1992 (Gay Pride Day) and twenty-three years later, the wound of his absence still affects Sneed. Her experience is just one of many which convince me that when an HIV

[240] Alex Haley, *Roots: the Saga of an American Family* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976).

cure is found, AIDS mourning publics will still be needed to help us process our grief and forward our memories to later generations.

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