BETWEEN THE SWISH AND THE SWAGGER:

GAY MALE IDENTITY AS PRESENTED BY CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD,

LARRY KRAMER, AND MICHAEL CUNNINGHAM

by

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Abstract

In considering the development of a gay identity in America, it is remarkable to consider the drastic change to which that identity has both endured and adapted in only the last half-century. When considering the historical events that have most influenced gay men and their portrayal and performance as sexual minorities, the Stonewall Riots of 1969 and the AIDS Crisis of 1981 are the two catalysts that have most spurred the evolution of how gay men perform their homosexuality. In attempting to better understand how American gay men have evolved in such a performance, I have closely analyzed Christopher Isherwood's *A Single Man,* Larry Kramer's *Faggots,* and Michael Cunningham's *Flesh & Blood,* in order to identify how the gay identity has been historically constructed in America. Specifically, I argue that, in just a few decades, gay men have evolved very quickly in how they construct their identities around their sexual orientation, from being ostracized because of it, to taking on the label of *Gay* or *Queer*.

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Chapter 1: Between Theory and History: The Search for Gay Identity

In considering the development of a gay identity in America, it is remarkable to consider the drastic change to which that identity has both endured and adapted in only the last half-century. When considering the historical events that have most influenced gay men and their portrayal and performance as sexual minorities, the Stonewall Riots of 1969 and the AIDS Crisis of 1981 are the two catalysts that have most spurred the evolution of how gay men perform their homosexuality. In attempting to better understand how American gay men have evolved in such a performance, I have closely analyzed Christopher Isherwood's *A Single Man,* Larry Kramer's *Faggots,* and Michael Cunningham's *Flesh & Blood,* in order to identify how the gay identity has been historically constructed in America. Specifically, I argue that, in just a few decades, gay men have evolved very quickly in how they construct their identities around their sexual orientation, from being ostracized because of it, to taking on the label of *Gay* or *Queer*.

While gay men have been the objects of stereotype and ridicule for much of history, a larger group identity steadily developed in the twentieth century, creating a gay culture that was very much unique in hetero-normative America. Additionally, the Stonewall Riots and the emergence of AIDS forced the larger gay identity to rapidly adapt, particularly in how gay men portrayed a group identity, performed masculinity, and explored their own sexual desires. Christopher Isherwood's *A Single Man,* Larry Kramer's *Faggots,* and Michael Cunningham's *Flesh & Blood* showcase the changes that the gay identity underwent during the latter half of the twentieth century in America. These three texts, all by prominent voices of the gay canon, serve as primary documentation of the gay experience, particularly of how gay men viewed themselves and each other within a hetero-normative society's

rapidly fluctuating approval and expectations of male homosexuality from the early 1960s to the mid 1990s. In discussing a gay identity, I use the term loosely, as I am primarily concerned with how gay men think of themselves and each other within a hetero-normative society.

I begin this project with a chapter analyzing the homophobic popular discourses that surround Christopher Isherwood's 1964 novel *A Single Man*. Here the reader is presented with George Falconer, an Anglo-American who is reeling from the loss of his partner, Jim. In this text, it becomes clear that the hegemonic discourses of post-war, family-centric America make George all the more isolated, for society does not have an identity for him to wear or a place to be himself. Here, the gay protagonist is encapsulated by the hetero-normative majority and is made single by the homophobic discourses of his time. This text is representative of the performance of male homosexuality pre-Stonewall. The plot of this novel would have likely been drastically altered had it been set a decade later, as George likely would not be as ostracized during the first decade of gay liberation. In spite of this, George is able to reconcile his isolation with a larger desire to live an honest life.

Larry Kramer's 1978 *Faggots* has long been considered a prominent, even obvious, text within the gay canon and will serve as the focus of my third chapter. It tells the story of Fred Lemish, a man approaching middle age in the "gay ghetto" of 1970s New York City. He desperately attempts to find a long-term relationship, reminiscent of the back-story between George and Jim. However, the sexually liberated gay identity disallows such a relationship for Fred. The text derides the promiscuity and drug use of the gay scene that surrounds the protagonist as he navigates the never-ending party atmosphere. This

novel's position within history is perfect for dissecting the structures that surrounded the performance of male homosexuality, in that it captures the excitement of sexual freedom while also critiquing it. Of paramount importance to this text is the debate between hetero-normative assimilation and sexual freedom faced by gay men of this era. Gay men, for the first time, were confronted with decisions related to just how hetero-normative they wanted to be with regards to gender expression, partnering, and monogamy.

My final chapter explores gay culture during the AIDS epidemic. The "gay cancer," which first made American headlines in July of 1981, wiped out the never-ending orgy Kramer describes. Earlier gains for gay rights were diminished as the larger public further rejected the gay community, as many felt it was primarily responsible for the spread of the epidemic. Concurrently, the rise of Queer Theory in both the academy and the larger culture began to change the dialogue surrounding sexuality and gender. Once again, gay identity changes and adapts to the new *Queer* landscape. Michael Cunningham's novel *Flesh & Blood* exemplifies this transition as it exposes the reader to the Stassos family, whose son, Billy, happens to come of age as AIDS is decimating the gay community. Unlike the other two texts, Billy is one of several protagonists, as the novel follows the story of the Stassos Family. Here we see a man come to terms with an identity that is not limited to his sexuality, but rather is based upon more multi-faceted experience in addition to his identity as a sexual minority.

This study is deconstructive in nature, as I explore and critique the structures that surround and police the identities taken on by American gay men in recent history in order to identify tropes that characterize the gay male community. Specifically, I use Dr. David Halperin's 2012 book entitled *How to Be Gay* as a basis for my theoretical discussion.

Halperin does an exhaustive job of moving through contemporary history and popular culture while identifying what he calls a "gay sensibility," or the cultural practices that make the gay community unique and authentic. His primary texts are those originally created for a heterosexual audience that gay men have "queered," or texts that gay men have recoded as exemplary of their experiences as sexual minorities. My research attempts to show how his theories relate specifically to the work of three prominent gay authors. This thesis aims to discover the similarities and differences between how Halperin claims gay men identify with their sexuality, and how three of the most popular voices of the gay canon actually write about gay characters. The heart of this discussion is obviously built upon the gender/sexuality performance model of traditional Queer Theory. However, my goal here is to move beyond the tenets of Queer Theory in hopes of discovering how the culture of gay men can be specifically studied outside of the larger Queer umbrella. I believe this is important simply because I believe in the importance of Gay Studies as a specific and separate entity beyond the Queer label. In particular, David Halperin's work is central to this study, for he is one of the few that has attempted to speak of a larger gay male culture.

This thesis does not follow an explicitly anti-essentialist model with regards to either gender or sexuality. While Queer Theorists usually reject any notion of essentialism in gender and sexuality, I intend to follow Halperin's lead. He insists that Queer Theory's institutionalization of non-essentialism forbids scholars from studying "being gay [as] experienced through highly patterned forms of embodied sensibility—even as those patterns tend routinely to be disavowed by gay men in their efforts to escape 'stereotypes' and 'labels'" (Halperin 63). While I do not intend to merely trade in stereotypes in this

thesis, I agree with Halperin's suggestion that Queer Theory has historically boxed the study of gay men to the point of being unable to speak about a larger gay culture or identity. I strongly believe that gay men do live their lives within certain structures created by a larger culture that is specific to the gay male experience. Therefore, I hope to use Halperin's methods of studying the gay sensibility to paint a broad picture of how gay men identify with their own gayness in three specific texts that correlate to three specific periods in gay history. Ultimately, I concur with Halperin's belief that it is time for this field of study to evolve past Queer Theory to an identity-centric model focused exclusively on gay men. This is in opposition to the practice current in many institutions of studying gay men under the Queer umbrella along with all those that are not heterosexual or gender normative.

Chapter 2: Single Before Stonewall: Finding a Gay Identity in Christopher Isherwood's *A Single Man*

Christopher Isherwood's *A Single Man* is one of the most recognizable and accessible novels in the gay canon in that it directly intervenes in the homophobic discourses that surround George Falconer, the titularly single protagonist. It broke ground for Isherwood himself, as this was the first novel in which he penned a blatantly and unapologetically homosexual character. The novel's circadian plot, despite lasting the length of only a single day, deeply exposes George's lack of identity while simultaneously commenting on his social status as a gay man. This text serves as a glimpse of gay life before the advent of the liberation brought on by 1969's Stonewall Riots and the proceeding gay movement. It depicts homosexual men as they were during a time when most believed them to be suffering from a pathological illness brought on by some kind of moral failure.[1] Indeed, the protagonist begins his day with only the most basic trappings of an identity, for an identity is held from him until the latter stages of the novel. It is the psychological and emotional progression of George's day that allows him to claim an identity related to his sexual orientation, a progression that directly mirrored the events and sentimentalities that surrounded male homosexuality leading up to Stonewall. Thus, this chapter argues that this text serves as a conscious intervention of the homophobic discourses of pre-Stonewall America.

Despite being cited as a cornerstone of the contemporary gay canon, the novel did not find universal acclaim upon publication. As revolutionary as the novel might have been in its honest depiction of a homosexual male protagonist, the initial responses from critics largely ignored that particular piece of George's characterization, according to David

Garnes in his essay "A Single Man, Then and Now." Those that did acknowledge George's homosexuality actually point to it as the main source of conflict within the novel, as Garnes cites Phoebe Adams of *The Atlantic* as writing that the novel is primarily focused with "George's battle with the normal world" (Adams, 121). While most contemporary queer theorists and readers would shudder at the word *normal*, Phoebe Adams unintentionally created a record of society's homophobia and hetero-normativity. While one of the most common analyses of the novel today is that of George's progression in grief, I argue that he is actually creating a uniquely gay identity within the text as he processes his grief and comes to terms with his status as an *other*. Therefore, I believe Adams to have been unintentionally correct, for this novel documents George's progression toward an identity within the homophobic discourses of his time.

Furthermore, I assert that this novel about a single homosexual man, mourning his recently deceased lover, is representative of American male homosexuality within a given historical context. George serves as an Everyman character that represents his species, for the text treats the homosexual subject as if he truly were a different animal, as he spends his day observing the inhabitants of his hetero-normative sphere as if he were behind glass. While observing that animal, the detached narrative perspective of the text occasionally reads like a script from a documentary, where the subject is watched and described from a distance. The Everyman status given to George paired with this documentary-like narration allows the reader to draw conclusions about gay men through George, as he becomes symbolic of the species.

An early indication that George is written as a specifically homosexual Everyman is found in his initial waking scene. As his day begins with the usual creeping in of

consciousness, the burden of time instantaneously enters his mind. As he seems to recognize his surroundings, the recognition of the ticking clock begins to take hold.

> But now isn't simply now. Now is a cold reminder: one whole day later than yesterday, one year later than last year. Every now is labeled with its date, rendering all past nows obsolete, until—later or sooner—perhaps—no, no perhaps—quite certainly; it will come. (Isherwood 9)

This early passage makes use of a basic tenet of the human experience—the acknowledgment of inevitable death—as further means to universalize George's character. However, this fades as George regains consciousness and is sucked into the role that society forces him to play.

The very linear form of the novel mirrors the ticking of the clock for a character that is painfully aware of his mortality. Perhaps one of Isherwood's more subtle points is his early acknowledgment of man's limited time in this world, regardless of which sex one might find arousing. This is, however, one of the very few references in which commonality can be made between George and the heterosexual world, as Isherwood is quick to remind the reader that death holds different consequences for the "homosexual species" that is George. Rather than being survived by memories as a father or husband, George would be survived by very little, as a life lacking a socially validated identity would certainly be quickly erased by the passage of time.

Such a preoccupation with death is not to be overlooked, primarily due to the fact that the main transition within this novel takes place within George's own psyche. He begins the day in a state of obsession with death, fueled by the loss of his partner, Jim, and he gradually goes about a life in which he performs his role as the homosexual widower in

a world that has no place for him. This eventually changes until he finally comes to an acceptance of his isolation within the hetero-normative world.

However, as George continues to regain awakened consciousness at the novel's opening, his general universality begins to fade and is instead replaced by comments that indicate his place as a solitary representative of his kind, an Everyman of a particular and separate species. Using the pronoun *it*, the third person narrator seems to remember George's otherness as he describes George having to dress himself in a way that "must be acceptable to them" (Isherwood 11). By initially withholding George's name from the reader, Isherwood also withholds an identity from his protagonist, furthering the idea that George is different: a man without a genuine role to play.

While man often assumes his name is inseparable from his body, in reality he confuses social identity with biological being. It is the social structure that gives a man a "namable" identity, a truth that relates to the intensely social nature of the human species. By being referred to as one's name, one is given a place, a validated persona within the confines of society. Our protagonist, however, seems painfully conscious of his name being merely symbolic of false pretense. George recognizes his unauthenticated role within that sociability. On his drive to work, George considers,

> In ten minutes, George will have to be George—the George they have named and will recognize. So now he consciously applies himself to thinking their thoughts, getting into their mood. With the skill of a veteran he rapidly puts on the psychological make-up for this role he must play. (Isherwood 41)

By having to consider the social desires and conventions of the heterosexual majority, George accepts his lesser status within the social structures that surround him, truly making George a man without a valid and authenticated identity.

This initial waking scene begins Isherwood's main conflict within the novel: the binary between the heterosexual *them* versus the homosexual *me.* This is a binary that has existed for men that are attracted to men since sexual orientation was first considered to be an intrinsic part of one's being. If we are to follow Foucault's theory of the Repressive Hypothesis, the creation of the heterosexual-homosexual binary is a fairly recent phenomenon within the context of social history. It was not until the mid-nineteenth century that homosexuality appeared as anything beyond a same-sex physical act. Foucault reminds us

> There is no question that the appearance in nineteenth-century psychiatry, jurisprudence, and literature of a whole series of discourses on the species and subspecies of homosexuality, inversion, pederast, and "psychic hermaphrodism" area of "perversity"; but it also made possible the formation of a "reverse" discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or "naturality" be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified. (Foucault 101)

George begins his day without "speaking on [homosexuality's] own behalf." He operates only under the homophobic discourses of the hetero-normative culture that surround him, as they are all pervasive. As the novel progresses, however, Isherwood takes on several of these specific discourses as George slowly begins to think of himself in ways that are

unique to his life and experience; he begins to reconcile his existence with his homosexuality, creating a gay identity beyond that expected by the homophobic society.

The idea that homosexuality was the lesser or deprived form of sexuality was so pervasive that the text indicates that even Jim made a last ditch attempt at going straight. While Isherwood only vaguely sketches this particular piece of back-story, the reader is able to ascertain that Jim briefly left George to be with a woman named Doris in Mexico. Doris is introduced on her deathbed as George visits her in the hospital. George recalls that Doris was once

> demanding that George should step aside, bow down and yield to the female prerogative, hide his unnatural head in shame. I am Doris. I am Woman. I am Bitch-Mother-Nature. The Church and the Law and the State exist to support me. I claim my biological rights. I demand Jim (Isherwood 96).

This idea of society existing to support the heterosexual union and tear down the homosexual one was, unfortunately, echoed quite prominently in the scientific community.

Specifically, Dr. Irving Bieber heavily drove the medical and psychological discourses surrounding homosexuality following World War II. A psychoanalyst, he became immensely popular after his *Psychoanalytic Study of Male Homosexuals* was published in 1962. The basis of Bieber's work was what would today be considered as very "soft science," for he essentially took the Freudian view of sexual development and attempted to explain homosexuality as symptomatic of certain failures of development. In homosexual males, for example, the blame was placed on an absent father figure and a domineering mother who feminized the boy. While this approach was an improvement over the earlier view that homosexuality was a choice and that choosing to be attracted to

one's own sex was a moral failing, it nevertheless contributed to a misunderstanding of the homosexual male experience and fostered therapies to "change" sexual orientation.

Much of Bieber's research actually consists of psychological surveys rather than experimental work, making it difficult to determine whether certain correlations of data are actually indicative of the population or merely of those surveyed. This research was conducted primarily in response to Evelyn Hooker's work that mirrored Kinsey's, which implied that most adult men have homosexual desires at varying levels but they are mostly repressed.[2] Bieber instead returns to the notion that homosexuality is heterosexuality corrupted. It is fear of heterosexuality and masculine gender expression that fuels homosexual desire, according to Beiber. The fact that many of his subjects had attempted heterosexual intercourse and reported performance issues was actually reported in his study to be proof that heterosexuality was the more natural form of sexual expression (Bieber 305). The idea that a gay man would suffer from erectile dysfunction while in bed with a woman is laughably obvious to a contemporary audience. It also is indicative of the lack of scientific rigor of Bieber's argument; however, his work was largely accepted as fact by the American academy. This was the latest "science" about homosexuality and its origin. For the academic George, this indicates that he would have faced an additional level of pressure, for a specifically gay identity was also being "scientifically" held from him.

Even Isherwood biographer Claude Summers occasionally attributed varying facets of the author's personal life to these pieces of Bieber's popular psychology. Growing up, Isherwood's mother held an intensely strong influence in his life, as she tried vehemently to raise him into a respectable Edwardian gentleman. In Summers' analysis of Isherwood's earlier body of work, he identifies a series of repeated characters' tropes and coins them

The Truly Weak Man and *The Truly Strong Man.* According to this theory, both characters are involved in a paramount struggle that he refers to as *The Test.* It is actually *The Truly Weak Man* that creates and engages in *The Test* while *The Truly Strong Man* is self-assured and blissfully ignorant of his battle against *The Truly Weak Man's* insecurities. Summers explains that "One source of the neurosis that afflicts *The Truly Weak Man* is his domineering mother, a Freudian carnivore who destroys her child by arresting his maturity" (Summers 45). While Summers' analysis of *A Single Man's* significance to the gay rights movement is correctly identified in later pages of Summers' Isherwood biography, this particular observation of character tropes clearly indicates the Bieberian psychological discourses that influenced Summers' reading of Isherwood's novels. It is remarkable to consider the fact that Isherwood's own biographer seems incapable of removing himself from the homophobic psychoanalytical discourses of the time.

While the pervasiveness of Bieber's psychology of homosexuality was quite strong, Summers seems to miss that Isherwood very clearly subverts these psychoanalytic discourses within *A Single Man,* particularly as George describes his heterosexual neighbors. His neighborhood, once the epitome of bohemian modesty, has since been taken over by a middle-class subdivision that houses the families of returned GIs. George sits in his house separated from them all, on an island made by a small creek that encircles his property. He describes his neighbor, Mrs. Strunk, as

> trained in the new tolerance, the technique of annihilation by blandness. Out comes her psychology book—bell and candle are no longer necessary. Reading from it in a sweet singsong she proceeds to exorcise the unspeakable out of George. No reason for disgust, she intones, no cause for condemnations…All is due to heredity, early

> environment (Shame on those possessive mothers, those sex segregated British schools!), arrested development at puberty and/or the glands. (Isherwood 28)

This is clearly a swipe at Bieber's work, which was released only two years before *A Single Man*'s publication. The idea that it was no longer the homosexual's fault is, according to Isherwood, a new type of "annihilation by blandness" where the heterosexual majority can now discriminate on the basis of pity rather than absolute hatred. The Strunks are a jarring juxtaposition for the quiet and intellectual George. Their children are loud and raucous and George is constantly avoiding special invitations to their home for drinks, specifically because he is invited over only when the Strunks' other friends are not around.

Even George's best friend, fellow English expatriate Charlotte, is unable to fully believe in the legitimacy of George's homosexuality. As they dine and become drunk she begins to throw herself at him:

> As they embrace, she kisses him full on the mouth. And suddenly sticks her tongue right in. She has done this before, often. It's one of those drunken long shots which might, at least theoretically, once in ten thousand tries, throw a relationship right out of its orbit and send it whizzing off on another. Do women ever stop trying? No. But because they never stop, they learn to be good losers. (Isherwood 145)

Charlotte's advances indicate the popular belief that changing one's sexuality was, in fact, possible; that all George really needs is to find the "right" woman to cure him of his homosexuality. He seems painfully aware of this belief, for he regrets having run to her when he found out about Jim's death and considers, "I betrayed you, Jim; I betrayed our life together; I made you into a sob story for a skirt" (Isherwood 126). This further alienates George, for even his best friend cannot validate a relationship that was the cornerstone of

his life. While pairing this lack of an ally within his own personal life with the homophobic discourses that surround his public life, George continues to be ostracized.

Despite Bieber's study freeing homosexuals of the responsibility for their condition, the popular discourse surrounding same-sex desire remained quite hostile. *Boys Beware*, a public service announcement released in 1961, demonstrates the public's fear that adolescent males might fall prey to the sexual and moral threat of older homosexual men. The short film emphasizes the idea that the homosexual is pathologically ill and that his sickness is invisible, making it impossible to know if you are in the presence of one. Some homosexuals, according to the film, are quite passive, meaning that they might surreptitiously attempt to lure boys to homosexual acts, while others might be far more aggressive and molest young boys. Regardless, both types are portrayed as being quite cunning and sneaky. A homosexual might "play to a boy's interests by being approachable and friendly, by buying the boy gifts. However, payments are always expected in return" (Davis). This is but one example of the entrapment of homosexuals within the role of deviant in the eyes of much of the larger public.

The fear of the homosexual is a phenomenon that Isherwood directly responds to. In a lecture that he gives on Aldous Huxley, George clearly describes fear as the catalyst of prejudice and violence:

> Now, for example, people with freckles aren't thought of as a minority by the non-freckled. They aren't a minority in the sense we're talking about. And why aren't they? Because a minority is only thought of as a minority when it constitutes some kind of a threat to the majority, real or imaginary. And no threat is ever quite imaginary. (Isherwood 70-71)

His lecture refers to the uncomfortable reality that mankind is intrinsically fearful of the unknown, and therefore, the heterosexual majority logically fears homosexuality. This is especially true because there is no visual way of knowing who exactly is homosexual or heterosexual, unlike racial minorities that can often be visually segregated. By being blatantly honest about human nature, Isherwood challenges his readers to acknowledge their own fears that may influence their own prejudices. This lecture also seems to be George's only attempt at activism. By pointing out prejudice in general, George is setting the stage for those who might come after him and experience a less homophobic world than he encounters. Such self-awareness in George is particularly amazing, as it shows that he is somehow able to transcend the homophobia that surrounds him. Sadly, this was not the case for many of his homosexual brethren.

The public attitude displayed in the *Boys Beware* PSA was reiterated on a more massive scale in 1967 with the release of Mike Wallace's *CBS Reports: The Homosexuals.* Interviewing a mix of self-identified homosexual men, most of whom speak from behind an identity-protecting screen, the program takes an allegedly unbiased look at homosexuality through a very hetero-normative lens. While reiterating the psychoanalytic theories, laws, and public opinion that surrounded homosexuality, it spent a great deal of time focusing on the depression that homosexuals supposedly incur. It also spends a great deal of time propagating the stereotype that homosexual men are inherently more promiscuous sexually than heterosexual men. The report claimed that this promiscuity made it impossible for men to enter into serious committed relationships with a same-sex partner. This claim was supported by the idea that the homosexual preferred the anonymity of large cities in which he could "satisfy his lust for same-sex encounters while not drawing

attention to himself." (Wallace) The final interviewee actually was a closeted psychoanalyst who himself had sex with men. He is quoted, "I personally don't believe in love with another man. That is the stuff of gay folklore. In reality we are so narcissistic that we could never possibly love another man." (Wallace) The idea that homosexual men are incapable of long-lasting homosexual partnerships is, quite likely, symptomatic of the societal discourses here discussed, in which the homosexual man has neither the self-worth nor the exemplary couples that would make such coupling more likely.

The reader is never exposed to an insane homosexual lust in George. In fact, the memories he carries of his partner Jim are mostly quite happy and void of the crazed lust described by Wallace and others. Isherwood implores the reader to imagine two men

> living in this small space, standing elbow to elbow cooking at the same small stove, squeezing past each other on the narrow stairs, shaving in front of the same small bathroom mirror, constantly jogging, jostling, bumping against each other's bodies by mistake or on purpose, sensually, aggressively, awkwardly, impatiently in rage or in love (Isherwood 12).

The popular idea that two men could not happily cohabitate in a loving relationship is rejected by the very presence of this narrative. Were George as the Wallace documentary described, he'd be in a bathhouse, enjoying the company of a stranger, not mourning the death of his deceased lover.

While this homophobic environment is key to George's isolation after Jim's death, it cannot be wholly blamed for George's lack of identity. It is the absence of any other openly homosexual characters that separate the protagonist from being able to process his grief. Because no actual character in the text validates their relationship, George is without a role

to play in his own grieving process. No narrative of the grieving homosexual widower existed, making any acceptance of Jim's death extremely difficult. This lack of a familiar role for him to play is only further compounded by the masculinity that George is expected to perform in postwar California. Queer theorist David Halperin describes the basis of American masculinity as mandating "rugged independence, healthy self-confidence, high self-esteem: in short, the denial of need, pain, 'resentment, self-pity, and various other unconsoled relations to want'" (Halperin 219). Not only, then, is George's grief withheld because of Jim's sex, but also due to the demands of masculine performance, which strictly prohibits any type of vulnerability.

No discussion of the development of a uniquely homosexual identity would be relevant without looking closely at how a man who is attracted to his own sex interacts with and performs gender. When considering the genre to which this novel belongs, however, it becomes difficult to pin down a specifically gendered tone. Halperin observes in his 2012 book *How to Be Gay* that genre is very much coded for gender in the larger American culture, writing that "men act while women appear." Grief, for example, is generally coded in very feminine terms, as the masculine "hatred" for the emotional forces men to deal with such emotions privately, with little public mourning. The appearance of grief would not be a masculine phenomenon as it lacks action. It is a state of being that influences how one might appear to the larger world. A novel about a gay man pining for his dead lover, then, becomes inherently feminine simply because it very publicly acknowledges these feelings of grief. The existence of this text mirrors what Halperin notes about gay culture at large, that

> a gay subject who is drawn to those affective or discursive possibilities may be expressing not an identification with women so much as an attraction to the cultural values associated with certain practices that happen to be coded as feminine by generic conventions. (Halperin 338)

Appearing feminine is not something George fears, as do the characters of latter authors. Instead, this conflict between the inherent masculinity of the character and his feminine state serves as fodder for gender commentary, as this text exposes the inability for men, specifically gay men, to grieve.

Gender within this text is treated uniquely, as I believe that Isherwood actually places femininity at the center of many of his passages and discusses masculinity only through its relation to the needs, desires, and actions of women. While this structure seems as if it would challenge patriarchy at its core, in reality George seems to place blame on women for emotionally and psychologically castrating men. Returning to his observations of the Strunks, George seems to believe that he and Mr. Strunk are more or less the same, and that it is Mrs. Strunk that has domesticated her husband for the sake of breeding. Furthermore it is the obviously heterosexual Mr. Strunk who serves as *The Truly Weak Man* within this novel, if we return to Summers' model of Isherwood male-character tropes. However, instead of an imposing mother figure, Isherwood presents Mrs. Strunk as the force that makes Mr. Strunk *Truly Weak.* Mrs. Strunk has stolen her husband's primal maleness through the castration of marriage and reproduction. He is now a tool for financially maintaining a monogamous, child-producing union meant to carry on the hegemony of the white-picket-fence.

Surprising to the contemporary reader, George believes that women actually hold more power over society than do men. The male characters are victims to the female prerogative for George: Mr. Strunk bends to the will of his wife; George must tactfully tolerate and disarm Charlie's fumbling attempts at seduction. It is truly a woman's world for George, as he notes on his drive to work,

> "Ben-Hur would certainly chicken out—jockeying from lane to lane with the best of them, never dropping below eighty in the fast left lane, never getting rattled when a crazy teen-ager lands on to his tail or a woman (it all comes of letting them go first through doorways) cuts in sharply ahead of him. (Isherwood 33)

The entitlement of women is paramount in George's view of gender. Earlier in this paper I pointed toward the passage where George visits Doris' bedside. This is another example of the female authority in George's life, as she held all hegemonic power imaginable over him, as she was entitled to a life with his partner while he was not.

The female prerogative to ensure good breeding has robbed George of a world he knew during the war, a period in which morality seemed to be a bit more relative than in George's present. Toward the end of George's day, he finds himself drawn to The Starboard Side, a watering hole known for its loose customers and beachside location. It was at The Starboard Side that George met Jim during the war, back when the place could be described as:

> Hitch-hiking servicemen delayed at this corner for hours, nights, days, proceeding at last on their journey with black eyes, crab-lice, clap, and only the dimmest memory of their hostess or host…The magic squalor of those hot nights, when the whole shore was alive with tongues of flame, the watch fires of a vast naked barbarian

> tribe—each group or pair to itself and bothering no one, yet all a part of the life of the tribal encampment—swimming in the darkness, cooking fish, dancing to the radio, coupling without shame on the sand. (Isherwood 148)

If there are any certain allusions made to masculine desire within this novel, this is where I point. Masculinity, for George at least, is the disregard of propriety, to be alive with "tongues of flame." It is only through the feminine desire to breed that George believes such flames are extinguished. However, postwar capitalist moralism has caught up with The Starboard Side and its beach in the protagonist's present. George admits that "The hitchhiking servicemen are few now and mostly domesticated, going back and forth between the rocket base and their homes and wives" (Isherwood 148). The bar has installed a television, causing bar patrons to fix their gaze on the screen rather than each other. To George, this clearly symbolizes the victory of the feminine consumer culture; man's primal urges have been completely dominated.

However, in evaluating George's view of the gender binary, it is necessary to also consider how he fits in as a larger character. While the views he holds toward the women of this novel are borderline misogynist, I believe that this attitude stems from simply having no place within the gender binary he sees around him. George seems largely unconcerned with being seen as feminine, his performance of masculinity is so spot-on that it goes unchallenged. If anything, George seems to consider his gender in a more pure light, for it has been uncorrupted by the desires of women. That pureness appears to come from desire, as George fondly recalls the happenings on The Starboards Side's shorefront years before. It does not appear to have to be homosexual desire, as George has very little qualms in describing women as sexual objects. Instead, masculinity becomes desire:

uninhibited and passionate sexual desire. Women, to George, inhibit that desire and create structures that box in and disarm such urges. Without the feminine influence in his life, George views himself as untainted by the fickleness of consumerism.

The relationship between sexual desire and identity is at the heart of both this novel and this discussion, for many a scholar has pointed toward George's day as symbolic of his transformation in grief. However, I assert that George's progression is not simply one of spontaneously coming to terms with Jim's death and finding a desire to find another partner; instead it is the awakening of an emotional and sexual desire for his student, Kenny, that allows George to be able to cope with and disregard the homophobia that surrounds him. His identity shifts from that of the timid and morose outsider to one that demands to be recognized, particularly with regards to his homosexuality.

Kenny has a unique and complicated role within this narrative, as he can be read as the catalyst for George's eventual acceptance of his place in the world. While it is tempting to try and map out Kenny's rather ambiguous sexual identity, that becomes rather irrelevant for this discussion. What is important, however, is that Kenny serves as the object of a desire that had previously lain dormant in George. Upon shedding their clothes and entering the surf in front of The Starboard Side, George acknowledges

> the stunning baptism of the surf. Giving himself to it utterly, he washes away thought, speech, mood, desire, whole selves, entire lifetimes; again and again he returns, becoming always cleaner, freer, less. He is perfectly happy by himself; it is enough to know that Kenny and he are the sole sharers of the element. (Isherwood 163)

It is as if the heterosexual world has melted away, leaving George with only a man he desires. It would hardly be a stretch to continue the baptism metaphor further, by asserting that Kenny and the surf serve as forces that allow George to be able to shed his dry and static identity—an identity of the man who tries desperately to blend into the hetero-normative world. He moves from being a homosexual subject to being a man with the early trappings of a uniquely gay identity.

It is not merely a sexual desire George holds for Kenny, as that is the most obvious and surface level of his attraction. Instead, George becomes quite fascinated with his dialogue with his younger pupil. In a mad desire to impart any type of wisdom he can to Kenny, George answers Kenny's plea to tell him what he knows with the response, "But I can't. I quite literally can't. Because, don't you see, what I know is what I am? And I can't tell you that. You have to find out for yourself" (Isherwood 176). George is imploring Kenny to find himself on his own terms, and not to sacrifice one's identity for the strategic purpose of blending in.

It is clear that the pederastic nature of this relationship is important, as the age difference forces George to view his life from outside his present in hopes of giving Kenny profound life advice. Regardless of Kenny's actual sexual orientation, the exchange of youthful excitement for life and sage wisdom awakens George's own desire to live. While it appears that George is sexually attracted to Kenny—he appears briefly in George's fantasy during a brief solo-masturbation scene just before the novel ends—the younger man's youth and seemingly endless possibilities are far more attractive to George and far more important within this text.

Despite the overtly homophobic popular and psychological discourses of pre-Stonewall America, Christopher Isherwood's *A Single Man* intervenes in the homophobic discourses of its time fearlessly. As the novel concludes with George's assumed death, the reader is left with an intense sense of universal human mortality, regardless of the protagonist's sexual orientation. George leaves the world a man at peace with the death of his partner, for he realizes that, "you can't betray a Jim, or a life with a Jim, even if you try to" (Isherwood 127). But more importantly, George dies as a man that has found a very specific identity in an intolerant society. The events that spun into motion at a New York City gay bar five years later would allow a growing number of men greater opportunities to mirror George's journey of finding identity through homosexual desire.

Chapter 3: Camping in Manhattan: The Gay Identity and Camp in Larry Kramer's *Faggots*

As a gay man I find that working with Larry Kramer's *Faggots* does, on occasion, become quite awkward. I read through the plethora of graphic gay sex scenes in this novel and secretly hope that no straight person ever reads this, perhaps revealing my own intrinsic desire to assimilate. The intense satire of the novel is more than a warts-and-all-tell-all of the gay ghetto: it is an unapologetic exploration that paints gay men as self-crippling, sex-obsessed egomaniacs. To add an even further level of tension, Kramer, with a great amount of foresight, blatantly takes a swipe at my own work when he writes, "some graduate student somewhere would do a dissertation on the sweet symbolism in the life of Fred Lemish" (Kramer 349). While Kramer was right to identify both me and the many other graduate students who have written about this novel and its protagonist, my goal here is not to look for symbolism in Fred's life specifically. Instead, I am interested in how this novel functions as a campy representation of the gay identity in the age of gay liberation, particularly in the gay ghetto of 1970s New York. This text paints the gay identity as being dependent upon a highly sexualized community. Whereas George's identity from *A Single Man* is based upon a solo journey of acceptance due to his isolation, the gay identities presented in *Faggots* are dependent upon relationships between gay men, creating a unique community and culture that is specific to their experiences.

While many critics have been quick to point to the rough writing style employed by Kramer, I would argue that this is not meant to be a tight and formally sculpted narrative. This novel is a work of camp and, as such, is meant to be rough around the edges. Camp, a word commonly understood to mean anything garishly provocative, in reality holds much

greater importance in terms of larger gay culture. Defining camp is not an easy task, but for the purposes of this paper, we will borrow David Halperin's definition from his 2012 book *How to Be Gay.* He writes that camp is "a relation with the long-standing gay male cultural habit of refusing to exempt oneself from social condemnation, as well as the practice of laughing at situations that are horrifying or tragic" (Halperin 202). Previous analyses of camp culture tend to associate camp mostly with the practice of drag, where gender performance is amped to provoke commentary. However, there is a far greater power in Halperin's broader definition, as it implies that camp has the ability to disarm any label or charge thrown; as gay men are able to laugh at themselves, they render an insult or accusation powerless. It operates both as performance style and defense mechanism. The gay experience is sheltered by camp, for it refuses both outsiders and disciples from doing harm. Therefore, by giving the world such a satire, Kramer charges the gay community with its crimes while simultaneously allowing us to laugh at his over-exaggerated presentation.

This novel functions as a collection of sketches with a long cast of characters. Kramer introduces the reader to every imaginable gay stereotype as the narrative jumps from bar to orgy to bathhouse to the parties of Fire Island. The linear plot of the novel is unimportant for this discussion, as it primarily is made up of individual experiences at the aforementioned places. Like Isherwood, Kramer opens his novel by segregating the gay characters from the heterosexual world. He opens with a series of statistics about faggots in New York City, informing the reader that they total over two and a half million. This separation implies that Kramer's observations about gay men will paint them as a monolithic species, despite his foci on the interactions between individuals.

The only character with a significant amount of emotional depth is protagonist Fred Lemish, who, like George from *A Single Man,* serves as something of an Everyman, described as, "your average, standard, New York faggot obsessive kvetch. Nice though" (Kramer 16). By being described as average and standard, Kramer gives license to interpreting any event of the novel as somehow connected to Fred's identity and the monolithic gay identity he represents. Once again, as a camp representation of gay men, it is of paramount importance to describe Fred as also operating somewhat as a caricature.

Like Isherwood, Kramer invokes the diagnoses of traditional psychoanalysis as he writes Fred as having what we would now blithely refer to as "daddy issues." Blaming Fred's shortcomings on his absent father figure and overbearing mother would be a pointless exercise of self-deprecation were the novel more serious in its handling of the gay community. However, the campy characterization of Fred allows the reader to simply laugh off Fred's back-story as Freudian dribble, as Kramer plays the stereotype against itself. Further, Kramer even stabs at Freud's theories of sexual development, which assumes gay men were unable to progress past the anal stage, by penning Fred as being often preoccupied by his irregular bowel movements (Kramer 107). While Isherwood sarcastically interacts with America's popular beliefs about the psychology of homosexuality, Kramer openly debases those beliefs by creating a character that so pathetically and blatantly conforms.

While Fred's characterization is clearly campy, I argue that this novel works similarly as a whole. There are certain incidences that indicate it working as a meta-text, as it seems to poke fun at itself and its position, gaining power through self-deprecation. From the onset, Kramer sardonically uses references to a gay identity that is a unified

phenomenon, as he compares certain random aspects of it to hetero-normative practices. He refers to the idea that, "dogs are faggot children" (Kramer 10), brutally alluding to much larger themes of hetero-normative assimilation versus specifically gay identities. The fact that Fred is unsuccessful in attempting to pitch a movie about gay life in New York is further proof that this text is a work of camp, as his heterosexual producer ultimately is disgusted by the gay ghetto into which he is drawn, indicating that this particular text might be equally unsuccessful in normalizing homosexuality. It is this self-acknowledgment and self-deprecation that distinguishes this novel as a work of camp, rather than merely a work of satire. Satire does not generally acknowledge its own shortcomings in its judgments.

While Isherwood's George never admits shame of his homosexuality or his life with Jim, this novel offers a completely polar environment due to the frankness about same-sex desire that followed the start of the gay liberation movement. Many of the faggots described within this text appear to have little problem accepting their own same-sex attraction and most are blatantly proud to live outside of the hetero-norm. In fact, there appears to even be a feeling of self-righteousness within the text. In miming an editorial from a weekly fag rag, Kramer writes,

> let us try to summon up inspiration from our illustrious ancestors, those forefathers who, had they opened their mouths, would have made our cause great a few years earlier…Thanks a lot, gang. We didn't know about you till you were dead. You've made it so much easier for us to tell the world we're here, WE'RE HERE, *damn damn damn* your hide, and we shall make our presence *known! felt!, respected!, Admired!, Loved!* (Kramer 103)

This quotation not only speaks to the existence of a homosexual community, but one that is actually proud of their existence. This is a far cry from the homophile movements of pre-Stonewall gay life that usually met in secret. Further, the self-righteous tone behind this bit of prose speaks to the profound effect that Stonewall and an organized gay movement had on the gay population. Not only was pride felt, this quotation indicates that it was compulsory.

The sections of the text that are viewed through Fred's perspective do not have the same confidence expressed in the editorial. In fact, the nervous Fred thinks to himself,

> 'I'm happy! I'm happy! I want you to know I'm happy. I wouldn't have it any other way. If I had a choice today, I would choose to stay the way I am' Good for you Fred! Good courage! Stout lad! (Stop calling yourself stout! You're thin, now. You're thin!) (Kramer 53)

This personal confession reeks of being forced; further highlighting the importance of community and brotherhood within this text, for it implies that individually, one might be unsure of his place as a gay man in a hetero-normative world. However, when joined together with other gay men, pride in such an identity can exist. Kramer is implying the importance of a gay man's identity being linked to the existence of his community and the culture that he creates with his homosexual brethren.

When considering a novel about a certain community of individuals united by a common sexual desire, it would seem natural that sexual acts would take the foreground. Indeed, the characters in *Faggots* seem driven by a need to fuck. However, this novel seems primarily concerned with revealing the methods of foreplay that surround the actual act: a non-stop, drug-fueled, party culture. In observing three men dancing, the narrator notes,

> Each danced in a similar style, two legs implanted solidly on the ground, movement only from the knees and hips, the former back and forth, the latter side to side, hands discreetly undulating in and out and only within a modest circumference from the upper torso, eyes always straight ahead or closed. It was either a lazy man's dance or a wise one's, since its lack of caloric intensity allowed, with the aid of a few chemicals, for non-stop participation midnight till dawn. (Kramer 23)

Most of the faggots that Kramer portrays assumedly have lives outside the ghetto, but they are hardly mentioned beyond an occasionally divulged occupation. The action of this plot takes place in parties, clubs, bathhouses, and orgies, characterizing men primarily based on both whom they sleep with or with whom they socialize. An unidentified faggot in the text is quoted as saying

> 'If the Outside World is ugly and not many laughs and doesn't want us anyway, what's wrong with making our very own special place, with our dancing and drugs and jokes and clothes and music and brotherhood and fucking and our perfectly marvelous taste!' (Kramer 265)

Kramer indicates that whoever a gay man is outside of the ghetto is merely performance, and it is through sex with men and through fellowship with other gay men that one is able to claim one's true identity. However, it appears that a man's identity in the ghetto is not uniquely his own, but rather a representation of the desires and performances of a monolithic culture and identity.

The main conflict, for Fred at least, is that the sexualized culture of the gay ghetto is not emotionally fulfilling. Fred's intense desire for monogamy and commitment drives his pursuit of Dinky, a man either incapable or unwilling to give Fred what he wants. Halperin

points to basic sexual development in explaining desires similar to Fred's, for he explains that

> if most of the men you grew up wanting were bound to reject you anyway, through no fault of your own, and if your prohibited desire for them was therefore destined to express itself only in dreams, in hopeless fantasies of sexual fulfillment and romantic bliss, then you had no reason to let the world constrain your daydreams or limit the scope of your fantasies to the narrow field of the possible. (Halperin 230)

Halperin concludes that simply being a sexual minority makes it difficult for those desiring a long-term relationship to adjust their expectations to the reality of their choices for a partner. Fred's desires and romantic fantasies mirror the extravagant ones Halperin implies; however, the evolving gay culture that surrounds him values the freedom to have sex with whomever they chose over long-term coupling. And to be deemed as sexually desirable, a man clearly had to put on the airs of what Kramer would call *butch-ery*.

The performance of masculinity is vitally important in this text, as the collective desire for masculinity in a sexual and romantic context creates a need for butch performance. Fred describes this phenomenon as follows,

> These articles of clothing, or permutations of same (khakis, Levis, with button flies only, and not preshrunk, painter's pants, Adidas, items of butch-ery) were the uniform. He felt safest wearing them, though he knew not why. Was it hiding? Or homogenizing? A way of staying anonymous to the outside world but recognizable to the inmates? If clothes make the man, what were they making? A way of insisting they were men, more men than men? …And were leather and jockstraps and

> football jerseys and boxing shorts all a send-up and a turn-on, and was this a clue to the faggot sensibility? (Kramer 32-33)

Such a *faggot sensibility* is unique to this particular time period as it reinforces the notion that an individual, monolithic, gay masculinity was considered the norm. I would even argue that Kramer is writing about a sort of *butch drag,* as hetero-normative masculinity is performed in an intricate pageantry described in the above quotation.

The pervasiveness of hyper-masculine performance in this novel also highlights the fear of being perceived as un-masculine (I specifically avoid the term feminine here because to do so would only cement a binary view of gender in this paper). Kramer exposes the reader to a personal ad that implores its readers "take particular note that youth must be masculine both in looks and behavior and not involved in anything like hairdressing." (Kramer 60) This text, despite being penned before the championing of gender performance by feminist and queer theorists, hints at the idea that the intense desire to appear masculine is just that: an appearance. Fred's analysis of the items of butch-ery in the gay ghetto creates an inconsistency when paired with the above personal ad, as Fred seems to be alone in his ability to critically analyze his community of friends and lovers. However, the larger gay male culture, represented by this nameless ad, clings to the idea that one is essentially butch or fem. It is only through a character's desire to appear butch that the improbabilities of the gender essentialist groupthink are exposed. David Halperin mirrors this idea as he writes:

> The love-object has to be able to accommodate the fantasy of butch desirability that the would-be lover projects onto it…Thus, a man who arouses your desire initially appears to you as a pure archetype, an embodiment of the masculine erotic value

> that makes him attractive. In your perception he is *the* jock, *the* paratrooper, *the* boy next door. But as soon as you have him, be becomes an individual instead of an essence, an ordinary queen instead of a Platonic idea…He becomes a sister. (Halperin 206)

The larger gay community, in turn, enforces this sensibility, for sexual fulfillment can only take place if a man is able to find a partner that buys into that man's performance of masculinity. Looking at this culture through Fred's eyes empowers the reader through Fred's observant and intelligent commentary, as he is willing to expose his own individual motivations and desires with an honesty in contrast to the larger culture's desire to keep up appearances.

Gender and sexual performance again comes into play for the faggots of Manhattan as Kramer comments on the gay performance of hetero-normative partnering. In addition to Fred's struggle to get Dinky to commit, the arrival of Timmy, a young suburbanite, provides an obvious and pathetic example of the desire to partner up. Only several hours after arriving in the city, Timmy is taken to an orgy where he meets Winnie, a model known as the Winston Man for his rugged beauty that evokes the Marlboro Man trope. The two have a clichéd, love-at-first-sight moment, the cliché made particularly campy due to Kramer's insertion of sounds coming from the men having sex around them. Eventually, Winnie is spurned by Timmy's acknowledgment of other men's advances and avoids him. The following day, however, upon Winnie's fall to his death during a mid-air acrobatic performance, Kramer writes:

> Timmy cradles his Winnie in his arms and softly cries. He had seen it all. That fall from grace. He looks up and addresses the few spectators left in the empty

Roseland. "He was the most beautiful and sophisticated thing I'd ever seen. He taught me everything. He taught me love." (Kramer 250)

This particular scene is a mere campy homage to Romeo's discovery of the Juliet he assumes to be dead in her tomb. And while Timmy hardly commits suicide, the melodrama is amped for comedic effect. Kramer provides his reader with a farce of the hetero-normative tragedy. While in keeping with the camp tone of the larger novel, the vignette dealing with Timmy's love for Winnie speaks to the larger issue of a forbidden love. But while Romeo's love for Juliet was tragically doomed due to familial angst, Kramer suggests that Timmy's love for Winnie is tragic because the sex-obsessed party culture that surrounds them disallows their union.

Despite both Fred and Timmy's deepest wishes, the community highlighted in *Faggots* disallows a stable relationship between two men. The greatest symbol of this fact is Dinky himself, Fred's love-object who haunts the text as if he were a specter of unattainable commitment. Fred tries his best to domesticate him, to turn him into the husband figure that he appears to so desperately want. Dinky, however, is continuously noncommittal and appears in the vignettes of several other New York faggots, for he has sexual/pseudo romantic relationships with several different men. Beginning the novel in naiveté, Fred describes a sexual experience he had with Dinky as:

the gentle movements back and forth—making them one, oh happiest moment of moments! Making Them One! Dinky and Fred! Get the embroidered towels ready! Order them now! Find that spot in the country! Sign the lease! Dinky will remodel! Happily ever after is beginning right this very Now—were the most pleasing words

> Fred could ever recollect receiving. From anyone. Did not such tenderness mean his heart beat for Fred! (Kramer 21)

Through Fred's confusion between sex and love, Kramer implies that the larger culture and identity are likewise confused. The desire for a stable relationship is there, but remains unattainable.

Perhaps blame for this inability to couple can be placed on an adolescence of the culture, as Kramer seems to suggest whenever he alludes to the freedom felt by any of his characters. The experience of being recently liberated perhaps fueled the highly sexual atmosphere. The prominence of bathhouses, both in this text and the larger culture it portrays, symbolizes a culture following the major shifts of post-Stonewall gay life. In his analysis of an "emerging" gay culture, Laud Humphreys distinguishes, only a year after *Faggots'* publication, that the homosexuals of pre-Stonewall America were self-closeting (Humphreys 135). The bathhouse operated as an escape from the larger homophobic world, giving gay men a safe place where they could indulge in both sex and community with other gay men. The period in which Kramer writes *Faggots* still embraces the bathhouse culture, despite its original purpose no longer being necessary. Gay men are having sex everywhere in this text; the need to hide or limit one's sexuality no longer exists. However, the isolation of a gay man's sexual life in the days before gay liberation all but required a fractured personal life, where sex regularly existed simply as an act of sexual release, free of romantic attachment or commitment. Those in Fred's position of desiring a monogamous relationship with another man were confronted with a culture that was used to and expected sex free from larger meaning or purpose, simply because that was what was safe and practical before their sexuality was legitimized by the larger gay movement.

The camp of this text does have power over the sexualized, masculine *beauty* that is constantly the center of attention. Halperin explains that within gay culture, a constant war exists between *The Beauty* and *The Camp. The Beauty* is the man that everyone wants both sexually and romantically. He fits into the perceived notions of butch masculinity and is therefore extremely desirable. However, in addition to being a single person, *The Beauty* is also romantic and sexual desire in its most general form. Both of these ideas or definitions of *The Beauty* make them extremely volatile, for both have the power to devastate those who hold such desires. *The Camp* is the nemesis and antidote of the romantic and sexual power of *The Beauty. The Camp* manifests itself in sarcasm and wit as it attempts to disarm both sexual power and pretension, in its willingness to critique on anyone or anything. Halperin writes "camp is best understood in this relational context as gay male culture's way of trying to disintoxicate itself from its own erotic and aesthetic passion for masculine beauty" (Halperin 208). Because *The Camp* is the antithesis of *The Beauty* the gender binary typically personifies her as feminine. For Fred, Dinky is *The Beauty;* for Timmy it was The Winston Man. Therefore, this text operates as a means of trying to counterbalance the power held by *The Beauty* that surrounds and drives Fred and the gay men of this period.

The problem for Fred is that the gay culture Kramer presents ignores the power held by *The Camp* by being all consumed in a chase for *The Beauty. The Camp* is unable to save Fred's community from itself because she is not given a voice in the narrative. The faggots that surround Fred are too busy performing their monolithic masculinity in hopes of getting laid. Patty, a friend of Fred's, mentions to him at a bar:

> 'I was in love three times last week. But tonight, oh Mary, do I not forget them all! Are we not constantly assaulted by so much beauty! Click! Click! Click! New York is a marketplace! And the next one is more gorgeous than the last' (Kramer 227).

Patty continues by giving Fred news that his ex-lover recently arrived in New York, to which Fred's reaction is extreme indigestion, for "that beauty could still affect him, even though it was over, and so long ago." (Kramer 227). When *The Camp* is sidelined, as she is in this masculine-obsessed atmosphere, she has no platform to disarm; *The Beauty*'s power runs unchecked. Without the balance Halperin describes in gay culture, gay men entrap themselves in their own unquenchable thirst for *The Beauty.* Fred finally realizes his own powerlessness in this ethos when he exclaims,

> I'm making sex into love!, just as Handsome Stranger jumps up, pulls on his jeans, adjusts his silver bracelet, pecks a quick kiss, and says: 'I've got to rush, I'm meeting my new lover, we're going to live together starting tomorrow, so you mustn't breathe a word of this…' (Kramer 351)

It is Fred's journey, chronicled in this text, which gives breath to *The Camp* as Kramer's novel works to save the gay community from itself. Larry Kramer's *Faggots* is *The Camp.*

It is the implicitly campy nature of Kramer's writing that makes *Faggots* the foremost exemplary gay novel of the era between the *liberation* of the Stonewall Riots and the devastation caused by the AIDS epidemic. Christopher Bram writes in his *Eminent Outlaws* that

> folded inside the clumsy, conflicted novel is a very good novel where the novelist acknowledges that there are no simple choices. Fred famously lectures Dinky on how he must choose love and monogamy, 'before you fuck yourself to death,' a line

> that was later read as prophetic of AIDS. But Fred gives his speech while Dinky is dressing up in leather for an orgy; Fred is so turned on by the sight that he doubts his own pretty words about marriage. (Bram 184)

I believe this analysis to be spot-on, as the value of this novel lies in its ability to be unashamedly contradictory. It chastises gay promiscuity while simultaneously acknowledging as certain the naturality and pervasiveness of its existence. The cast of characters that operate as stock representations of gay male tropes exists in this text as camp representations of a distorted reality, allowing this novel to play both comedian and activist.

Despite the prominence this novel might hold, one might wonder how to read this piece's conclusion as anything beyond a hopeless precursor of a plague. Fred never finds the man of his dreams and does not appear to believe that he ever can. He is left with a community of friends that seem almost two-dimensional in their characterization. I assert, however, that there is a lot of hope written into the very style of this novel because, as a work of camp, it works to disarm and evolve the larger hegemony that gay men created following Stonewall. There is hope that by being challenged by *The Camp*, gay culture will be forced to self-examine and mature. And despite the fact that the intensely sexual nature of the community described in this novel created a framework for the rapid spread of HIV, there was a community in place to respond. It was primarily gay men and lesbians that cared for the sick while fiercely advocating for medical and political responses to the disease. Had the AIDS crisis plagued gay men before the time of gay liberation, it is unlikely that there would have been a community strong enough to respond in a forceful enough manner. Kramer, who would later help start Gay Men's Health Crisis at the height of the

AIDS epidemic, states in *Gay Sex in the 70s* that, "There is a line that goes through all of this, from the brotherhood of the Pines to the brotherhood of these [AIDS] organizations, and indeed; there were men that came to GMHC that I had been with on Fire Island. And it made me realize the abilities of our community. And it made me even angrier that we are constantly defining ourselves by our dicks" (Lovett).

Chapter 4: So Am I Gay or Queer? Queering the Homosexual Male in Michael Cunningham's *Flesh and Blood*

Both Isherwood and Kramer write about their gay male characters and their settings as if they belong to a separate species from their heterosexual brothers. They are beings made *other* from the larger hetero-normative population because of their deviation in gender performance and/or sexual desire. Both authors either imply or outright portray an identity for their gay characters that suggests that they serve as a standard for those men who are sexually and emotionally attracted to other men. This practice manifests itself for George in *A Single Man* by means of his isolation from a larger homosexual community, particularly as Isherwood implies that his singleness is representative of the experiences of any homosexual man in the age before gay liberation. Kramer showcases, in *Faggots,* a world in which a hyper-masculine culture creates an identity based upon community, in which the community enforces the performance of a specified and sexually strategic gay identity. Michael Cunningham, however, showcases gay men in the era of Queer Theory in his 1995 novel *Flesh and Blood*. He mirrors the Queer Theory assertion that a unifying or monolithic gay identity simply does not exist. Despite the parallels between Queer Theory's values of non-essential intersectionality (the idea that many aspects of one's personality lead to a performance of their race, social class, sexual orientation, gender, etc.) and Cunningham's text, however, there are still several tropes specific to the gay male experience that characterize two men of the Stassos Family. Thus, I argue that this text is representative of the limitations of contemporary Queer Theory.

Instead of writing his gay characters as defined by a void of community or part of a uniquely gay cultural hegemony, Cunningham presents his reader with a century's worth of

vignettes focused on the Stassos family, two members of which happen to be males who are attracted to other males. I use the phrase *happen to be* quite purposely, because Cunningham distributes the weight of his narrative upon multiple members of the family instead of exclusively focusing on his gay characters. The gay men Cunningham pens in this novel are not defined by their homosexuality, but rather are characters that mirror Queer Theory's insistence of intersectionality: characters that are more multi-faceted and whose identities are not formed primarily by their sexual orientation.

The rise of Queer Theory in the 1990s, for the purposes of this paper, will be defined by a breakdown between the separations of gay men and lesbians: an attempt to create a community of individuals that transcend binaries with regards to gender and sexuality. Instead of one's sexuality being identified exclusively with the gay community or the lesbian community, Queer scholars were urging the adoption of the more ambiguous title of *Queer.* Eve Sedgwick's 1990 *The Epistemology of the Closet* will be of most help in this discussion, as it quickly became one of the foundational texts of the Queer Movement. *Closet* painstakingly observes that the secret surrounding one's sexual orientation is representative of the larger binary structures that protect and enforce the hegemonic power of the heterosexual majority. This binary structure was of great importance in the formation of a gay movement, as it relied upon the existence of the straight/gay binary to urge its followers into political demonstration and action. As Queer Theory rose in popularity in the 1990s, the way in which gay politics was structured also shifted, most importantly in that the binary seemed to evolve from straight/gay to straight/any-non-standard-sexual-orientation-or-gender-expression.

Additionally, Sedgwick's *Closet* highlights Queer Theory's move from separatist models of gender and sexual identity, to integrative models; both of these defined by a specific vocabulary unique to each model. She explains:

> Charged as it may be with value, the persistence of the inversion trope has been yoked, however, to that of its contradictory counterpart, the trope of gender separatism. Under this latter view, far from its being the essence of desire to cross boundaries of gender, it is instead the most natural thing in the world that people of the same gender, people grouped together under the single most determinative diacritical marc of social organization…should bond together also on the axis of sexual desire. As the substitute of the phrase "woman-identifies woman" for "lesbian" suggests…this trope tends to reassimilate to one another identification….Gender separatist models would thus place the woman-loving woman and the man-loving man each at the "natural" defining center of their own gender… (Sedgwick 58)

In regards to this thesis of identifying the various ways in which gay men have constructed their identities, Queer Theory made strides to differentiate itself from the gender separatist model of the unique and essentially gay male community found in Larry Kramer's *Faggots.* Rather than identifying the butch performance of gay men within that text as a representation of a collective masculine ideal, Queer Theorists would interpret the *butch-ery* of Fred and his compatriots as a conscious phenomenon, where gay men blatantly attempted to disguise their non-masculine attributes in hopes of getting laid. David Halperin explains in *How to Be Gay*:

> The corrosive skepticism that emerged in the 1990s about the gender-normativity and egalitarianism of post-Stonewall, pre-queer gay styles made it hard to believe that anyone had ever taken gay male clone culture seriously. Recent converts to the cult of performativity in queer theory have tried, accordingly, to interpret the 1970s clone style, as well as butch femme role-playing among lesbians, as a knowing parody of gender roles, as a send-up of normative sexual conventions. (Halperin 54)

Queer Theory's favored integrative models of gender, conversely, would be inclusive of all gender and sexual expressions, as the label of Queer could be all encompassing.

To look at *Flesh and Blood*'s Billy and his development over the course of a near-century then, it is important to note that Cunningham eschews labeling the sexuality of male characters that might previously have been explicitly referred to as homosexuals, gay, faggots, etc. Billy is never described as a gay man, despite the fact he exclusively is attracted to men and displays occasional performances that are not gender-normative. He is initially described as "a boy who broods, who lives in books. Who refuses to know the names of tools and shows no interest in outdoor games" (Cunningham 46). While such characterizations are not necessarily indicative of homosexuality, Billy, at the novel's start, is at least understood to be gender non-normative. It is not until Billy loses his virginity to a man in college that the reader is exposed to a concrete sexuality for this character. Ben, Billy's nephew, also is not labeled as a homosexual, despite his regular mutual-masturbation sessions with his male cousin. Ben eventually takes his own life because of his inability to come to terms with his own attraction to men. This refusal to explicitly label male homosexuality mirrors the integrative model of sexuality espoused by Queer Theorists. It seems as if the Kinsey Scale, which ranks a person's level of potential

heterosexuality or homosexuality, suddenly returned to vogue in the 1990s and everyone was meant to become some murky shade of bisexual. The observations I make here about Cunningham's text are meant to try to identify how gay men are portrayed without being overtly characterized by their sexuality while simultaneously exhibiting tropes unique to gay men and their experiences.

Beginning with Billy, the most important aspect of his early life seems to be a struggle between his father's expectations for his son and the reality of his character. And while the trope of paternal disappointment has appeared in a myriad of texts to the point of cliché, it is Billy's atypical gender performance that seems to be most disappointing to his father, Constantine.

Simultaneously, Billy shows an immense desire in his early years to make his father proud; to enter into a sphere in which he can be the son his father clearly wishes he were. In an early passage from the text, a very young Billy asks his father for a toy horse to replace his broken one. Constantine replies that he would be willing to offer him a football instead, which Billy refuses:

> 'Your son wants a new horse,' Billy's father said. 'He don't want a football. I told him I'd buy him a football, he don't want it. He wants a new toy horse.' Billy could feel himself as a spoiled, greedy, ungrateful little boy. The louder he cried, the more firmly he became that, but the feeling of becoming it only made him cry harder. If he could have managed it he'd have slipped underground like a gopher and burrowed his way to Germany or Japan, someplace where he hadn't yet affected the air with his little desires. (Cunningham 30)

This early episode highlights the mutual disappointment placed upon the gay male child. Billy is not only a letdown to his father, but also develops a self-hatred for his inability to perform the role he is meant to inherit. Constantine's thoughts are later shared on the page years later where he considers

> He knew he loved his son—what sort of man doesn't?—but he wanted him to be different. He wanted, right now, to stand in this kitchen with his boy and talk to him about the world's elusive glory and its baffling, persistent disappointments. He wanted to wrestle with his son, to throw a football at him with all his strength (Cunningham 108).

The disappointment that Billy is exposed to so early in his life drastically colors his relationship with his father.

The Constantine-Billy relationship counters the earlier psychoanalysts who assumed that male homosexuality resulted from the absent father figure and domineering mother. Cunningham instead gives us a case where the father's inability to understand his son alienates him, but does not cause his sexual orientation. The relationship between Constantine and Ben is similar, except that Ben gives the outward appearance of gender-normativity. However, it is knowledge of his own burgeoning sexuality that drives Ben to swim out to the middle of the ocean before allowing himself to be pulled under. Cunningham writes,

> "He swam hard, to exhaust himself, to drain off the wrongness of his being. When he began to be seriously tired he stopped swimming, but when he stopped swimming he returned to himself. He was not tired enough yet; he was not gone. (Cunningham 439).

Such early trauma of being unable to successfully please paternal figures often cannot be endured without later consequences, as offered by Ben's short and tragic narrative.

Of particular concern for Billy is that he still maintains a great deal of male -privilege that must be reconciled with his homosexuality. The women that surround him are dependent upon their relationship with a male romantic partner. His mother, Mary, and his sister, Susan, both enter into heterosexual unions in which they, at least initially, define themselves through the roles of wife and mother. Billy is not necessarily obligated to define his success or larger life around such familial ties. This is but one aspect of male-privilege retained by gay men that most other members of the Queer spectrum do not have access to.

Regardless of burgeoning same-sex attractions that might be revealed during puberty, men are still raised in a patriarchal system for at least a decade before they might fully realize they too are *othered* because of same-sex attraction. Such early lessons in failing to portray and utilize male-privilege inevitably stay with gay men as they age, coloring the way in which they view themselves and those around them.

Having been penned in the second decade of the AIDS epidemic, it is also important to remember that history has placed the burden of AIDS more heavily upon the shoulders of gay and bisexual men, a fact that led to the eventual creation of the blanket medical term of *men who have sex with men.* While it is Billy's sister Zoe who eventually becomes infected and dies from AIDS-related causes in this text, the disease still seems to haunt Billy's existence as an adult. The text mentions that he "had buried a half-dozen friends, he knew well enough how long the changes could take" (Cunningham 321). While many people were involved in responding to the AIDS epidemic, the fact that the disease's

earliest victims in this country were thousands of gay men cannot be overlooked. Even in 2010, gay and bisexual men accounted for 63% of all new HIV infections (Kaiser). And while much of Queer Theory's politics was born out of the culture that surrounded the AIDS crisis, the fact that gay men were so disproportionately affected by the disease leads me to believe that such a history further differentiates gay men from other identities found under the *Queer* label.

Billy's nephew Ben appears in only a small fraction of the text, but Ben's suicide appears to be punishment for Constantine's hubris as well as a sort of karmic damnation for his inability to adjust his hopes and dreams for his family. As his grandson, Ben became Constantine's pride and joy-the son that Billy never was. He is penned as traditionally masculine and interested in things that Constantine can easily relate to, unlike Billy as a young boy. The dramatic irony of this relationship lies in Ben's own homosexual desire and experiences, making him have far more in common with his Uncle Billy than Constantine realizes. After dumping his grandfather from a sailboat, Ben madly sails the craft out to sea and his narrative ends as seawater begins to fill his lungs. Constantine dies less than a year later, alone and without both the family he had hoped for and the one life actually provided for him. Ben was Constantine's last shot at his dream, and it was Ben's discomfort with his own same-sex desire that snatched it from him.

Ben's narrative is one that proponents of Queer Theory actively try to avoid as they attempt to create a culture where varying gender and sexual expressions are accepted. However, this text shows that there are still tropes and experiences that are specific to gay men and their lives, particularly with regard to how male-privilege is affected by homosexuality. Even Ben, who is athletic and traditionally masculine to the point of being

repeatedly characterized as being the apple of Constantine's eye, cannot reconcile his sexuality with the larger expectations he is placed under.

It is for this reason that some scholars are making a theoretical move toward Post-Queer readings, as the one-size-fits-all approach of traditional Queer readings often overlooks issues that are unique to gay men or any other sexual or gender minority. While anyone can experience paternal disappointment related to gender identity or performance and anyone could lose friends to AIDS, the other letters of the LGBTTQQIIAA spectrum are simply too complex for the *Queer* title. The study of gay men is unique, just as is the study of Lesbians, Bisexuals, Trans people, etc. Acknowledging the heterosexual majority and dominance while lumping all others together might serve some political advantages, however, it only creates yet another binary between Straight and Queer. Specifically, Cunningham's novel points out how gay men interact with very specified gender expectations that affect their relationships with both their families and themselves.

Conclusion

While there are political advantages to joining forces with the other subsets of the Queer movement, I assert that the Queer label has simply become too broad. Each letter of the ever-expanding LGBT acronym represents unique experiences and expectations. When it comes to scholarship, I echo David Halperin's belief that we are short-changing ourselves by attempting to work within Queer Theory, as it attempts to speak of gender and sexuality in such un-essentialist ways that scholars are left without the ability to identify cultural tropes and experiences that are unique to gay men. Queer Theory, born of the feminist movement, simply has too wide a scope for some research, as it attempts to describe both sexual orientation and gender identity while simultaneously attempting to topple patriarchy, homophobia and transphobia through scholarship.

For some gay men, there certainly is unease about being represented by both theory and political organizations that focus on the entirety of the Queer spectrum. Gay activist John Aravosis expresses such concerns in his 2007 essay "How Did the T Get in LGBT?" He points to the continual failure of workplace protection bill ENDA to pass with clauses that protect the rights of transgender citizens, despite his assertion that it would have passed had protections only focused on sexual orientation. He points to this example as fodder for the question of why he is represented by organizations with such broad agendas, even going so far as to write:

> A lot of gays have been scratching their heads for 10 years trying to figure out what they have in common with transsexuals, or at the very least why transgendered people qualify as our siblings rather than our cousins. It's a fair question, but one we know we dare not ask. It is simply not p.c. in the gay community to question how

> and why the T got added on to the LGB, let alone ask what I as a gay man have in common with a man who wants to cut off his penis, surgically construct a vagina, and become a woman (Aravosis).

While this is perhaps a rather extreme approach, it does highlight the problematic nature of politically organizing around such broad goals. Academic Queer Theory often mirrors this phenomenon by overlooking attributes, goals, and experiences of gay men in order to speak and write in terms that reflect upon the entire spectrum of sexuality and gender expression.

As some scholars, including Halperin, call for a move to Gay Studies, others are clearly critical of such a move. In a review of three texts unrelated to this discussion, Michael du Plessis of the University of Colorado-Boulder attributes this call to a loss of power and importance previously held by gay men. He writes:

> It seems steeped in a nostalgia for the days when gay men could imagine themselves at the forefront of culture and politics, a time before those troublesome "others" (women, queers of all kinds, lesbians of all genders, bisexuals, and transgendered and transsexual people) transformed "the" sexual and gender struggle. (du Plessis)

Such comments inevitably demand an evaluation of the politics that surround gay men today and the undeniable fact that the gay male community is simply not subject to the amount of prejudice it once was. However, if this fact indicates that gay men are no longer worth studying, I wholeheartedly disagree. Perhaps there may be nostalgia for a time when it was simpler to categorize individuals based exclusively upon their sexual orientation; however, a focus on gay male study does not have to be either monolithic or Queer-phobic.

The observations of this paper are also too broad to speak for the gay male community as a whole, as the novels I explore focus on white, middle-class, gay men. This realization is perhaps the greatest attribute gay studies can take from Queer Theory: the importance of intersectionality, by which a person's identity is constructed through a multitude of factors such as race and socio-economic status. However, like Halperin, I do believe similarities can be found and studied throughout the larger gay community, particularly in the literature that community produces.

My call for further scholarship concentrated on gay male experiences or identities may seem exclusive, but such exclusivity is necessary for any work that attempts to focus on gay men unique of the Queer spectrum. As the LGBT acronym seems to grow annually, accepting new terminology for conversing about identity, the experiences of individual communities becomes even more muddled. It is time to respond to the voices of gay men with theory that does not lump them in with all other non-straight, non-normative gender expressions.

End Notes

1 See Irving Bieber's *Homosexuality: A Psychoanalytic Study of Male Homosexuals* for further information regarding the shift to viewing homosexuality as a pathological illness

2 See Evelyn Hooker's *Male Homosexuality* and Alfred Kinsey's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*

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