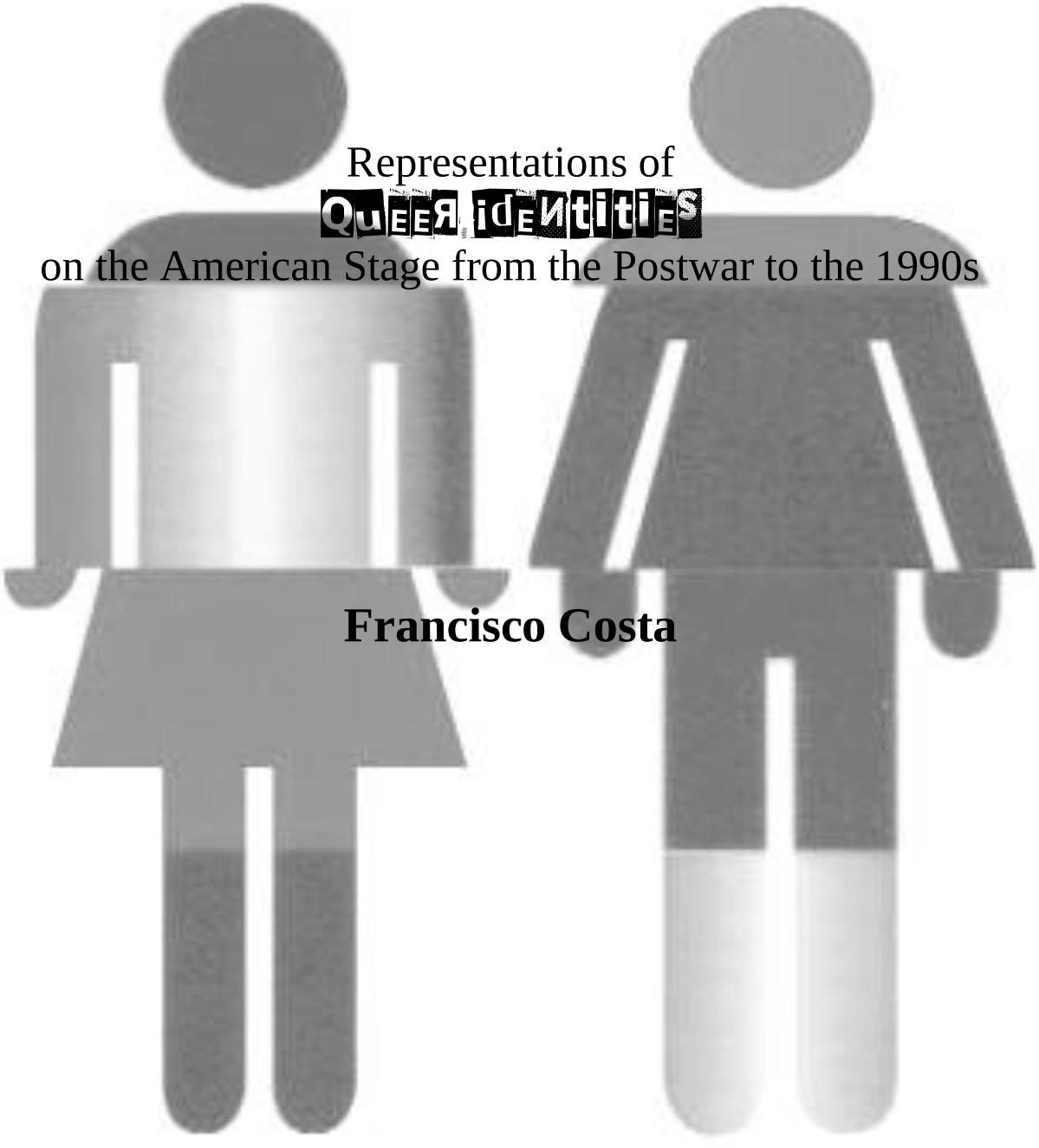
‘I Used To Be Subversive, But Now I’m Gay’:



Representations of
QUEER IDENTITIES
on the American Stage from the Postwar to the 1990s

Francisco Costa

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
School of American Studies
University of East Anglia
2013

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Date 13/06/2013

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● ABSTRACT ●

The central aim of this study is to examine 'non-normative' masculinities constructed and represented in American drama, theatre and performance throughout the second half of the twentieth century, thus assessing the 'queer' challenges these masculinities present to hegemonic 'heteronormativity.' To identify the historical, social and cultural constraints that shaped the manifestations of 'gay' male identities on the American stage from the postwar to the 1990s, I will offer extended analysis and close reading of selected texts. I will examine Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), *Suddenly, Last Summer* (1958), Mart Crowley's *The Boys in the Band* (1968), Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* (1985), Tony Kushner's two *Angels in America* (1992) plays, *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika*, Terrence McNally's *Love! Valour! Compassion!* (1994), and David Drake's *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me* (1994).

My analysis of the selected texts will demonstrate that some of these particular plays represent 'gay' male individuals who challenge, and others, who identify themselves with ideological principals of a hegemonic 'heteronormativity.' Consequently, in this study I partially outline a history of 'queer' drama, theatre and performance in America throughout the second half of the twentieth century, and examine how 'gay' male identities were represented particularly by 'gay' male authors during this period. I will also analyse to what extent these representations were subversive, assimilative, or had a hidden agenda, and most importantly, I seek to deconstruct established conceptions of the works here analysed, considered to be the most assimilative, which through a 'queer'-inflected close reading can be in fact read as the most subversive.

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● INTRODUCTION ●

> Writing does not come to power. It is there beforehand, it partakes of and is made of it. […] Hence, *struggles* for *powers* set various writings up against one another. Let us not shrug our shoulders too hastily, pretending to believe that war would thus be confined within the field of literati, in the library or in the bookshop. […] But it is true that the political question of literati, of intellectuals in the ideological apparatus, of the places and stockages of writing, of caste-phenomena, of 'priests' and the hoarding of codes, of archival matters – that all this should concern us.
>
> - Jacques Derrida, 'Scribble (writing-power)', 1979

Subversion versus Assimilation

This study is about the construction and representation of 'queer' identities, particularly 'non-normative' masculinities, in American drama, theatre and performance of the second-half of the twentieth century. By any definition this is a 'queer enterprise.' The title *I used to be subversive, but now I am gay* is provocative, in that it offers a stimulating criticism of the contemporary strategy of 'gay assimilation', which seems to be the major objective of the 'gay rights movement' at this historical moment. The reason I am employing the terms 'gay assimilation' and 'gay rights' instead of the inclusive acronym 'LGBT' results from the dominant signs of 'straight' conformity having become more and more the ultimate measures of 'gay' success. In this context, the rights of all other 'deviant' identities are not included in this 'gay' success, but rather those of a particular group of 'gay' individuals.

From the last decade of the twentieth century and increasingly in the beginning of the twentieth-first century, the trinity of marriage, military service and adoption has become the central concern of a 'gay movement' centred more on achieving 'straight' privilege than challenging power. Indeed, if two men or two women wish to get married and/or adopt a child, their union and/or adoption should be legally allowed and recognized by the state and afforded all the benefits they are entitled to. If a 'gay' man or 'lesbian' also wants to serve their country in the military, it should be their option without fear of expulsion or harassment and with an honesty and openness about their sexual identity. Yet, should the goal of the 'gay rights movement' be symmetry? Or should same-sex desire endeavour to cultivate a new social dynamic that could be described as horizontal rather than the hierarchical dynamic which characterizes the present 'heteronormative' system under which we

all must live? Or, should ‘gays’ and ‘lesbians’ – should I, as a non-heterosexual – seek the ‘disintegration’ of a society defined by a ‘heteronormative’ system rather than integrate and assimilate into the very society that has long oppressed them/me with severe physical, emotional and psychological consequences?

Assimilation is for me not the answer for those who practice same-sex desire. My position in no way diverges with those ‘gays’ and ‘lesbians’ who seek to get legally married or adopt, nor those who want to serve openly and with integrity in the military. What troubles me about the objective of symmetry is that it does nothing to restructure or challenge the ‘heteronormative’ system itself. Even with assimilation, the dichotomous structures and binaries ‘male/female’, ‘masculine/feminine’, ‘heterosexual/homosexual’, ‘straight/gay’ will still be imposed in which the first term is persistently privileged over the second term. Assimilation does not account for the structure of representation itself which centralizes its power in a specific (and highly problematic) construction of masculinity that in turn degrades all other subjectivities.

Thus, partially for personal reasons and my particular interest in this topic, the central aim of this study is to examine ‘non-normative’ masculinities constructed and represented in American drama, theatre and performance throughout the second half of the twentieth century, thus assessing the ‘queer challenges’ these masculinities present to hegemonic ‘heteronormativity.’ Consequently, in this study I will partially outline a history of ‘queer’ drama, theatre and performance in America throughout the second half of the twentieth century, and examine how ‘gay’ male identities were represented particularly by ‘gay’ male authors during this period. I will also analyse to what extent these representations were subversive, assimilative, or had a hidden agenda. Most importantly, I seek to deconstruct established

conceptions of the works here analysed, considered to be the most assimilative, which through a 'queer'-inflected close reading can be in fact read as the most subversive.

In this study, therefore, I will address the following questions: (a) how do both 'gay' and 'straight' masculinities function as a reflection of one another? (b) what is the 'queer' element through which dramatists, performers, and spectators operate the construction of 'heteronormative' masculinity on a so-called 'gay theatre'? (c) does the gay male appropriate a 'heteronormative' masculinity with the purpose of employing the power he is politically, socially, and culturally 'entitled' to as a man, or does he simply assume this incorporation as a way of concealing of his homoerotic desire? (d) does this 'gay' male incorporate this 'heteronormative' masculinity with the objective of subverting – 'from the inside' – its inherent principles? (e) what is the significance of the gender dynamics constructed and represented in the selected works for the formation of contemporary American culture?

These are questions raised bearing in mind the main objective of this study, and which I will address by focusing on specific elements concerning the construction and representation of heterosexual and non-heterosexual masculinities and homosocial and homoerotic relations – viewed as products of collective and personal memories – in the different texts. I will combine principles of several scholars in the course of my arguments, from historians, to political, and cultural theorists. Furthermore, to answer these questions, I will not be looking at the construction of readerly identities, in terms of the liaison between 'self' and text, but the construction of identities within the texts and how these mirror and possibly alter communities of readers/viewers.

Delimitations and Designations

The main analytic focus of this study will be 'gay theatre' produced in America during the second half of the twentieth century.[1] However, I do not intend here to establish a finished definition of 'gay theatre.' I will consider as examples of 'gay theatre' texts in which their authors and characters are non-heterosexuals (not only theatre that assumed itself militantly as such, but also theatre that subliminally represents 'gay' male identities). In studies that focus on 'queer' drama, theatre and performance – namely by Alan Sinfield, John Clum, David Róman, Nicholas De Jongh, to name a few – this term defines works that, explicitly or implicitly, represent the love or sexual desire between men, or where homoerotic desire is present.

Drama, theatre and performance were selected as the object of analysis of this study as these are cultural products which have long investigated ideas of identity, knowledge and the power of radical configurations of the body that notably precede queer theoretical paradigms. These paradigms have consistently drawn from the iconic work of pre-'queer' artists and philosophers that, by implication, destabilizes a perception of 'queer' as a specifically contemporary socio-cultural discourse. Additionally, drama, theatre and performance as challenging cultural intermediaries have been regularly appropriated by developing political movements to visualize,

[1] The American playwright William M. Hoffman in the introduction to what was the first anthology of explicitly 'gay plays', published in America in 1979, defines a 'gay play' as a play where the main character or characters are 'gay', or where 'homosexuality' appears as a major theme, but which is not necessarily written by a 'gay' author to a 'gay' audience. After presenting this definition, the author presents a distinction between a 'gay play' and 'gay theatre.' The themes, action and characters in a dramatic text determine if a play is 'gay' or not, but the way this play is performed by the actors and directed by the director determines if that production inscribes itself, or not, in the definition of 'gay theatre.' 'Gay theatre' involves, therefore, according to Hoffman, the existence of 'gay' subjects in both sides of the theatrical space – on stage ('gay' actors or characters) and in the audience ('gay' spectators). See William M. Hoffman, 'Introduction', in *Gay Plays: The First Collection,* (New York: Avon Books, 1979), (p. ix). In a different approach to this problem, the American playwright Robert Chesley simplifies it by stating: '[a] "gay play" is any play that wants to sleep with another play of its gender.' See Robert Chelsey quoted in Christopher Bram, 'Mapping the Territory: Gay Men's Writing', in *Particular Voices: Portraits of Gay and Lesbian Writers,* ed. by Robert Giard (London and Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), pp. xxvii-xxxvii (p. xxvi).

articulate and support their struggles, from confrontational street theatre and agit-prop performance, to the more experimental and established practices of the avant-garde. As a dynamic medium, it is through the touring circuits and fringe theatres that radical ideas and artistic experiments have been made possible and disseminated, where theatrical risk is expected and encouraged.

Despite the fact that a study of drama should place the text at the centre, the text will here be understood in its widest possible manifestations and contexts, from production of texts to reception of performances. Despite defining the terms 'drama', 'theatre' and 'performance' as distinct, performance theorist Richard Schechner presents these concepts as intrinsically connected. As Schechner explains, 'drama is the domain of the author, the composer, scenarist; […] the theater is the domain of the performers; the performance is the domain of the audience.'[2] Thus, drama is the tangible document that contains the dialogue or scenario for actors to follow; theatre is the series of planned actions that occur throughout the course of the performance event; and performance is 'the whole constellation of events, most of them passing unnoticed, that take place in/among both performers and audience from the time the first spectator enters the field of performance […] to the time the last spectator leaves.'[3] Therefore, drama being a complicated genre that is socially created, distributed and shared in a multiplicity of ways, dramatic literature will be here considered as the central object of analysis, but along with theatrical practices and performance theories. In order to recover the historical, social and cultural narratives, I will consider the plays themselves, and although not so centrally, the responses to them, the circumstances of publication, performance, and reception.

I also focus on the second half of the twentieth century because this is a

[2] Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory*, (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 70.
[3] Ibid. p. 71.

particularly profuse period of theatrical production in America and it also allows me to analyse through the selected corpus the influence that particular American historical, cultural and social moments such as the McCarthy era, the Civil Rights movements of the 1960s, and the beginning and development of the 'gay' and 'lesbian' liberation movements of the 1970s, Stonewall and the AIDS epidemic had in the production of 'gay' male identities by 'gay' male authors, and the representation of those identities on the American stage.[4] Thus, drawing on the political, social, and cultural context of the 1950s through the end of the twentieth century, I will consider the effects of these particular moments and I will also take into account the evolution of new dramatic and theatrical discourses.

With regard to the terminology deployed within this thesis, generally speaking, I should start by clarifying the term 'homosexual', which is a nineteenth century medical term, when 'homosexuality' was understood as a disease, as a problem to be fixed and eliminated. The use of this term also indicates the binary 'heterosexual/homosexual' in which the first term is implied as 'normal' and positive in the language of the 'heteronormative' system against the second term which is

[4] Stonewall is the name given to the events of June 1969 in New York, which began when the police raided a popular homosexual haunt - the Stonewall Inn in Christopher Street, a regular gay beat. This was a regular occurrence, but this time the reaction was different - the homosexuals fought back. The weekend of rioting that followed is now seen as a turning point in gay consciousness and the New York Gay Liberation Front (declaring commitment to revolution in its founding statement) was born in the immediate aftermath. There are numerous accounts of Stonewall: some by eyewitnesses and participants, others by social commentators and historians. See, for example, John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States 1940-1970*, (London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), Martin Duberman, *Stonewall*, (New York: Plume, 1994). The riots at New York's Stonewall Inn in June 1969, gave birth to the modem gay movement. Of course, Stonewall does not mark an absolutely clean break with the past, as many writers have remarked. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, for instance, argues that 'the closet', or what she calls the regime of 'the open secret', has been basic to lesbian/gay life for the last century, both before and after Stonewall. Nevertheless, she acknowledges that 'the events of June, 1969, and later vitally reinvigorated many people's sense of the potency, magnetism, and promise of gay self-disclosure.' See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 67. These changes, together with the widespread (if by no means universal) decriminalization of homosexuality in Euro-American societies, created a space in which a modem gay movement and culture might grow. But this growth, and the freedom it implied, entailed a radical questioning of social forms, a radical rethinking of the kind of political and social arrangements that might express and accommodate the personal experience being discovered in group consciousness-raising.

constituted as ‘abnormal’ and negative. In this study, however, the rather clinical term ‘homosexual’ will be employed when addressing a basic sexual predisposition towards a same sex object of desire, unless stated otherwise.

As for the terms ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’, these will be here employed also when addressing a basic sexual predisposition towards a same sex object of desire, considering that these terms are more specifically referents to the constructed twentieth century subject positions of the same configuration of desire, though quite distinctively politicized and re-inscribed as ‘social’ identities. The very word ‘gay’ is charged with conflict: a conflict that inheres and surrounds the question of identity. Adopted after Stonewall as a badge of positive self-identification, its current usage is so imprecise as to call into question its value as a meaningful term at all. Given its background, however, it is not inappropriately applied to the focus of this study. Its current usage, after all, however imprecise and contested, arose with and is inseparable from the emergence of the gay liberation movement after 1969.

I believe that the term gay now serves to name a specific fragment of a ‘community’, to be precise white men who tend to adhere to the specific corporeal paradigm of the muscle body and to favour integration through marriage equality and so on, thus the title *I used to be subversive, but now I am gay*. ‘Gay’ does not include people with the ‘wrong’ bodies, sadomasochists, sex workers, drag queens, butch dykes, people of color, bisexuals, immigrants, or disabled people. ‘Gay’ is wilfully blind to any reality external to its identity base, to the extent that gay politics refuses to acknowledge the marginality of other collectivities. Thus, a gay agenda permits unacceptable social, political, and economic structure to go unchallenged. In this context, and in this study, gayness is associated with a consumerist and assimilative identity.

I have never felt comfortable using this word to identify myself. I always felt and still feel like the other's other. I favour the word 'queer' to identify myself. Culturally and personally, it somewhat successfully recovers a term of 'abnormality' and negativity and converts it into one of empowerment. 'Queer', for me, goes beyond just my sexual orientation and allows me to be mindful and respectful of other's difference in that I never take for granted my whiteness, my class and my gender. Academically speaking, 'queer' is the most diverse and problematic term to deploy, encompassing as it does homosexual, lesbian, gay and all other terms used for articulating 'deviant' or non-heterosexual desires. 'Queer' however is subversive and has an expansive potential to challenge dominant structures and discourses, of heteronormative identity assignment, and of exploitative political economic structures. 'Queer' also refers to a protocol of 'reading' that is framed by processes of textual coding, subversion and an 'active' spectatorship that questions or disavows normative, compulsory, white, male, 'heteronormative' assumptions and 'preferred readings.' The radical rereading of 'non-normative' masculinities in the selected texts thus aims to explore the subversiveness and queerness of these masculinities.

Additionally, the primary target of queer discursive strategies is the socio-cultural imposition of 'heteronormativity', a term that specifies a general tendency in contemporary occidental sex/gender discourse to perceive and legitimize heterosexual identity as the 'norm'; which therefore configures all other forms as 'illegitimate', 'deviant' and 'abnormal.' Heteronormativity, as an operation of power, seemingly establishes and promotes a set of 'norms' of behaviour and ontology that are only definable in relation to those practices and behaviours of its 'abnormal' others. Since queer does not seek to align itself with any sexual identity/category, it is not only concerned with deconstructing the heteronormative matrix but also (more

problematically) all regulatory systems that have evolved in relation to it (including the formation of lesbian and gay identities): '[t]his 'queering' of lesbian and gay studies has been the subject of violent debate. Some claim that it radically erodes the last traces of an oppressive gender coherence, whereas others criticize its pan-sexuality as reactionary, even unfeminist.'[5]

First coined in 1993 in Michael Warner's *Fear of a Queer Planet*, Warner employs the term 'heteronormativity' to describe how heterosexuality is taken to be normative. Heteronormativity is not a simple account of the fact that the majority of the population is heterosexual; rather it is a critical terms that unfolds how heterosexuality 'operates within social practices as the implicit standard of normalization' inciting each of us to conform to heterosexual standards.[6] Thus, heteronormativity unpacks the extent to which everyone is expected to consent to the heterosexual norm.

Furthermore, the referent 'LGBT' (the sexuality specific lesbian, gay, and bisexual, and – the most open to interpretation and representation – transsexual) will be used to denote all corresponding individuals in order to describe their sexualities in an overarching way that reflects their personal choices, unless otherwise stated.

Finally, the problematic term 'community' will be here employed in line with the referent LGBT, when referring to a social group which prioritizes sameness and the cooperation of individuals to achieve common goals.

Theory and Method

Eve Sedgwick clarifies the continuously unstable relation between a man –

[5] Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction,* (New York: New York University Press, 2000 [1996]), pp. 2-3. The full range of this discussion is explored in more detail later into the introduction.

[6] Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 41.

who is born biologically as such – and the construction of masculinity. Sedgwick also argues that this construction is not exclusive of men, because women are also producers, consumers and performers of masculinity.[7] Thus, the analysis proposed in this study will have as its starting point the presupposition that a masculinity is constructed – and that a man constructs himself culturally, as the dominant gender. For this reason, it is important to have in mind that both masculinity and femininity are not simple binary oppositions. They are instead a pair of incorporated characteristics continuously changeable by race, social class and sexual orientation. They both depend, equally, on historical factors and social pressure. The construction of masculinity and femininity varies according to the specific historical contexts within which they are defined. Therefore, and according to David Savran, aspects related to gender construction are reliable barometers of a country's culture.[8] Consequently, and to better understand the aims of this study, it is important to understand gender, and particularly masculinity, as an imaginary identification and as a performative act.

Accordingly, queer theory will be adopted as the theoretical lens to support the textual and visual deconstruction of the selected texts, and also to demonstrate the queer and non-queer constructions and representations of the works analysed. The theoretical foundations of the project will be wide-ranging, but mainly drawn from key queer theorists (Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Anthony Giddens, among others), to enable a queer deconstruction/examination of the selected texts and their relationship with the reader, within their historical, social and cultural

[7] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Gosh, Boy George, You Must Be Awfully Secure in Your Masculinity!', in *Constructing Masculinity*, ed. by Maurice Berger, Brian Wallis and Simon Watson (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 111-20 (pp. 112-13).

[8] David Savran, *Taking It Like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism and Contemporary American Culture*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 8.

American context.[9] The delimitation of this study exclusively to gay male identities is also due to the complex nature of this theoretical model and the necessity of delimiting a specific corpus of analysis.

Furthermore, in order to fully explore the issues raised by this study, I need a criticism that is flexible and open to the consideration of secondary sources which record the nature of gender identity, masculinities and gender definition in the time period here considered. Thus, in this thesis, I will employ cultural materialism along with queer theory. Cultural materialism draws attention to relations between cultural productions such as dramatic literature and their historical context, including social, political and economic elements. Coined by Raymond Williams, cultural materialism's view of culture insists on the importance of community life, the conflicts in any cultural formation, the social nature of culture, and the cultural nature of society.[10] From a cultural materialist perspective, any dominant order

[9] See, for example, M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, (London: Penguin, 1981 [1978]), and Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2007 [1990]), and Anthony Giddens, *Modernity & Self Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, (Cambridge: Polity, 1991).

[10] Williams writings open his explication of 'culture' as a keyword of Western intellectual and social history: '[c]ulture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language. This is so partly because of its intricate historical development, in several European languages, but mainly because it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct and incompatible systems of thought' (Raymond Williams, *Keywords - a Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana Press, 1988), p. 87). Despite these confusions, Williams goes on to distinguish two major contemporary usages of the term 'culture', which he attributes to two different disciplinary areas: culture as a 'signifying or symbolic system', which according to him was the predominant concern of history and cultural studies at the time of this writings, and culture as a 'material production', which was the object of archaeology and cultural anthropology (ibid. p. 91). This distinction corresponds with similar binary models of culture that have dominated, and are still dominating, both the academic debate and the common sense usage of the term. Although these binaries are not necessarily totally synonymous, they all differentiate between two main aspects of culture: civilization versus culture, art versus the everyday, the universal versus the particular, 'culture' versus 'a culture' or Culture versus culture (see Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 37-8). Williams also links the history of this distinction to the development of modernity, which in the wake of the Enlightenment and fuelled by capitalist rationality uncoupled the symbolic aspects of culture from its material production. As a result, culture came to refer to 'a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development', related to the ideal of a universal, rational and emancipated humanity (Williams, p. 90). Later in the nineteenth century, its usage was more commonly restricted to the outcome of this process, the works and practices of artistic activity ('high art'), which were regarded as expressions of this humanity. At the same time, a second meaning of culture was taking shape, which was both particular and encompassing, referring to a 'particular way of life' in the sense of a group's total body of behaviour

restricts and falsifies human experience and literature plays a politically subversive role by exposing the contradictions and inconsistencies which undermine domination. Jonathan Dollimore, who has worked extensively along with Alan Sinfield on cultural materialism, explains, '[consolidation] refers, typically, to the ideological means whereby a dominant order seeks to perpetuate itself; [subversion] to the subversion of that order; [and containment] to the containment of ostensibly subversive pressures.'[11] Thus, from a cultural materialistic point of view, political power results from a very tenuous relationship between dominance and subversion, and through textual analysis it is possible to demystify this same power.

Focusing on the subversion of dominant ideologies and institutions, cultural materialism is the appropriate methodological tool for this study along with queer theory. Where cultural materialism and the queer-materialist criticism I here employ differ is in the focus on 'queerness' of the considered objects of study. Thus, in this queer-materialist study, queer is the privileged modality and the materialist analysis of it is accomplished from a queer perspective to achieve queer ends.

Application

Identity has been an essential concern for much recent occidental cultural and critical debate, particularly with regard to the mainstream contexts within which both

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(ibid. p. 90). In contrast to the first concept, for which culture existed only in the singular as a synonym for 'civilization', the second concept acknowledged the plurality of cultures. However, these cultures were generally regarded as defined by the 'regressive attachments which prevented us from entering upon our citizenship of the world' (Eagleton, p. 31), and associated with the ('inferior') practices of folk art, popular or mass culture, or the 'exotic' cultures of other peoples, which an emerging ethnography had begun to discover in the wake of colonialism. Today the term 'culture' is predominantly used in the second sense to signify all forms of organized behaviour and symbolic practice which constitute the way of life of a specific group, whether in 'traditional' or highly industrialized cultures, including those practices generally referred to as 'art.' Thus, when Williams devotes his own work to an attempt to forge a new relationship between material and symbolic production in culture from the point of view of a cultural materialism, then this attempt is intrinsically linked to the idea that cultural production may be both the site and the instrument of political struggle, a concept that clearly has its antecedents in Marxism.

[11] Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), p. 10.

individuals and communities are able to construct, negotiate and defend notions of self-identity and self-knowledge. The questioning of mainstream accounts of identity that assume the self to be an autonomous and stable being, independent of external influence, has dominated these philosophical and genealogical inquiries: from Descartes's ontological philosophies and Hume's liberal individualism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, to the fundamental challenges of Durkheim's theories of the individual as a product of economic organization in the nineteenth, and Mead's groundbreaking constructionist theories in the twentieth century. In addition to this, the changing paradigms of psychoanalysis, structuralism, post-structuralism and the revolutionary contributions of Freud, Lacan, Althusser and Foucault (broadly speaking, of course) have posed innumerable questions on the 'nature' of identity, which subsequently led to the consolidation of such debates under the rubric of 'identity politics.'[12] The general consensus that identity is not

[12] Over the last two decades 'identity' has become a key concept in analysing the contemporary world. A multitude of theoretical debates and political movements have laid claim to it: philosophy, social psychology, sociology, cultural studies and anthropology on the one hand, multiculturalism, postcolonialism, neo-nationalism and ethnic warfare on the other, have all produced multiple, sometimes overlapping, often contradictory definitions and usages of the term. Furthermore, as Stuart Hall points out, the popularity of identity as a topic for theoretical inquiry has developed, in spite of a profound critique of the same (see Stuart Hall, 'Introduction: Who Needs Identity', in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. by Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1996), p. 1). This critique has been targeted primarily at the concept of identity that lies at the heart of modernity: identity is the attribute that enables the modern individual to identify him or herself as a singular, selfsame, unified subject, unique amongst others and stable despite the changing of time, and at the origin and centre of reason, language, action, experience, power and desire. A series of 'ruptures' within the development of twentieth-century thinking has helped to 'de-centre' this subject and with it the concept of identity (see Stuart Hall, 'The Question of Cultural Identity', in *The Polity Reader in Cultural Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994), pp. 119-25, for a full discussion of this ruptures). In short: Marxism prepared the ground for abolishing the notion of the individual subject as the agent of history by declaring the primacy of social conditions to be the driving force behind historical change. In his 'anti-humanist' reappraisal of Marx, Althusser defined the subject as being subjected to ideology (a process he termed 'interpellation'), which provides the individual with the identity necessary to adapt to the governing capitalist system, and which in turn stabilizes the system and guarantees its functioning (see Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (London: New Left Books, 1971), pp. 121-73). Classical psychoanalysis laid the foundation for an understanding of the subject as being ruled by unconscious desire. Returning to Freud, Lacan defined desire as being founded on loss and therefore, rather than confirming the subject in its identity, revealing the subject to be deeply divided. The image of the self as a unified whole is learnt by the child only with great difficulty through encountering its own image in the mirror – thus looking at itself from the place of the 'Other' (see Jacques Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I', in *Ecrits: A Selection*

merely self-constructed but dependent upon some 'other' imposition/subordination, therefore, opens up a theoretical space for marginalized and oppressed communities to challenge and renegotiate those identities that have been (seemingly) imposed upon them in the process of subordination. Undoubtedly, this is a difficult (or even impossible) task indeed, and yet, it is the relentless and enigmatic objective of the contemporary phenomenon of the queer theorist and practitioner to engage with such a challenge.

The queer theorist's aim is to explore forms of 'deviant' (sexual) identities and gender performance that are seemingly 'free' of the demarcations and confines

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(London: Tavistock, 1977), pp. 294-324). This moment of imaginary self-recognition in the look of the other is for Lacan also the moment of the child's entry into the symbolic order of language, in which the individual is constituted as a subject. Structural linguistics had already positioned the subject within the rules of language and meaning, rather than at their source. The Saussurian theory of the arbitrary relation between signifier and signified, and the notion of language as a differential network of meaning, in which every signifier acquires its meaning only in distinction to other signifiers within the same system, also influenced Derrida and his critique of the 'logic of identity' that governs Western metaphysics. For Derrida, meaning is always deferred by the continuous play of difference – or 'différence' – at work in signification. The result is language's inability to define a stable identity: any idea of 'identity' is already inscribed in the differential structure of meaning (see Derrida, Jacques, *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1978). Finally, Foucault examined how the very idea of the human subject is a discursive construction that emerged at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The subject for Foucault is thus constituted as an effect in specific discursive practices and placed within a field of power-knowledge (see Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Tavistock, 1970). As a result of these 'ruptures', the individual is no longer the sovereign subject at the source of action, desire, language, meaning or history – on the contrary, it is subjected by them. Similarly, identity is no longer regarded as the property of a subject whose existence precedes it, but rather presents a point of 'temporary attachment to the subject positions [e, g. race, class, gender, sexual orientation, disability, nationality, etc.] which discursive practices construct for us' (Hall, p. 6). As such, identity is no longer selfsame, stable and unique, but fragmented, contradictory, open and unfinished. This is identity's first paradox: it has come to signify the exact opposite of what was once its semiotic identity (from Latin idem, the same). Its second paradox has been identified by Hall with regard to the current debate about identity: rather than making identity disappear as a concept, the critique has instead led to its proliferation, only now in a deeply problematized appearance. The post-structuralist 'de-centring' of subjectivity has joined force with the postmodern scepticism regarding the foundational metanarratives of culture, nation, class, etc., and a feminist and postcolonial critique of the gender and ethnic bias of modern concepts of subjectivity and identity. As a consequence, where once the modern problem of identity was defined in negative terms as role conflict alienation or 'identity crisis, today's postmodern, post-structuralist and postcolonial theorists talk about fractured, multiple and hybrid identities in positive terms as possible sites of resistance (see, for example, Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London and New York: Routledge, 1994, and Stuart Hall, and Paul du Gay, eds., *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1996). In response to Hall's question: 'What, then, is the need for a further debate on "identity"?', he himself provides two answers: theoretically, identity is a concept 'which cannot be thought of in the old way, but without which certain key questions cannot be thought at all', and politically, 'the answer lies in its centrality to the question of agency and politics' (Hall, p. 2).

of common compulsory (hetero) sexual configuration. A ‘gendered’ and ‘sexualized’ identity is proposed that problematizes ‘normative’ categorizations and is thus able to envisage a state of opaque flux, re-appropriation and re-definition.

However, this is an objective that is made even more difficult in that these discursive strategies can only really be addressed, evaluated or called into ‘being’ through a traditionally limiting heteronormative process of definition and inscription, which in truth would seem to defeat the object of attempting to ‘contain’ such a slippery concept. Queer discourses are currently offering some of the most innovative and interesting frameworks through which to explore the development and revision of definitions of gender, sexuality and identity; particularly (for this study) within the context of postmoderm drama, theatre and performance. Despite these innovative debates, any real analysis of the radical potential of queer artists, and the significant contribution that their work has made to such critical paradigms and experiments in contemporary drama, theatre and performance has yet to fully materialize. The debt that queer theory owes to a preceding history of transgressive performance is immeasurable, particularly within the context of a broader analysis of the role it has played in simultaneously constructing and deconstructing the heteronormative paradigm that underpins contemporary culture and society. It is a transgressive form of performance that both precedes and anticipates the types of performative strategies that did not begin to be formulated until the invocation and re-deployment of the term ‘queer’ in the nineties.

The linguistic complexities that emerge through the deployment of such volatile terminology are effectively ‘rehearsed’ and put into practice through performance, which as an art form is an ideal medium to radically question and ‘play out’ social strategies and structures of power that also formulate the way in which

performance has been both socially defined and theatrically read. But more specifically, these 'queer events' effectively foreground the problematic and often under-valued relationship between the (indeterminable) spectator and the (ephemeral) text. Queer theory and performance as a means of re-configuration have evolved from decades (or even centuries) of dissatisfaction with the way in which notions of gender, sexuality and identity are socially constructed and re-productively perpetuated in performance through a binary system of hetero/homo and masculine/feminine. And such systems have persistently reinforced traditional power structures (legitimising the former over the latter) that subordinate the homosexual/'deviant' in the face of an apparently dominant heterosexist culture and society. Sexuality has consistently been 'mankind's' most volatile and oppressive social taboo, and is therefore an effective site at which to begin to subvert and 'play' with the legitimacy of fixed sexual/power discourses, and thereby empower and articulate the 'abject' ontology of the 'queer.' As Carl Miller argues: '[d]rama is an ideal medium in which to represent anxieties about sexual licence, although it risks encouraging that which it condemns through such representation.'[13]

By exploring the traces of an already pre-existent queer dimension in drama that significantly pre-dates the emergence of a 'theory', an attempt will be made to explore how the expression and representation of 'deviance' in performance has transformed and mutated in reaction to the diverse and conflicting discourses that have sought to determine, fix and control it. 'Homosexuality' in performance, though still a volatile theme to explore, can be seen to no longer hold the same potential for social subversion that it formerly held in the years following the Stonewall riots in the late 1960s. Gay liberation has achieved much in the assimilation and (tentative)

[13] Carl Miller, *Stages of Desire: Gay Theatre's Hidden History*, (London: Cassell, 1996), p. 8.

acceptance of a previously abject and oppressed identity formation, but its cultural appropriation and commodification as a legitimate, yet subordinate, minority group merely succeeds in perpetuating common dichotomies of power that circumvent its subversive potency for social critique. It is, therefore, the 'queer' in performance that can now be seen to hold a more fertile transgressive potency due to its deconstructive approach to regulatory paradigms, narratives and readings of the body. And yet, in parallel to this, queer theory itself has evolved in relation to and drawn examples from performance to illustrate and consolidate the critical paradigms it attempts to construct. Queer theory and performance are thus inter-dependent in their wish to both activate and expand the limitations of their invocation.

There has been a good deal of work in the last twenty years on issues connected with queer drama, theatre and performance, and undoubtedly, prior scholarship has prepared the ground for this study. The first observation that emerges from a review of the literature is that poetry and prose dominate the American literary canon, while American dramatic literature has been a neglected, devalued and overlooked area in American literary studies. This generic hegemony of American poetry, fiction and nonfictional prose has resulted from drama not being considered wholly 'American' based on an idealized cultural nationalism, to the drama/theatre and text/stage binarism, to a multiplicity of other reasons that could lead to another thesis.[14] Despite an increasing interest in American drama, theatre and performance, both culturally and academically in recent decades, in part 'by an increased interest in an increasingly respectable, bourgeois, and commercial theatre', this is still far from obtaining the same canonical position that American poetry and

[14] For a detailed documentation and examination of this issue, see, for example, Susan Harris Smith, *American Drama: The Bastard Art*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

prose has.[15]

Nevertheless, this thesis builds on the contributions of other scholars and addresses lacunae in the still small field of queer theatre studies. As an interdisciplinary study, research in the history of sexuality grounds the methodology and provides crucial material about the larger sociocultural context within which each play is read. Kaier Curtin's pioneering *We can Always Call Them Bulgarians* (1987) and Nicholas de Jongh's *Not in Front of the Audience* (1992) usefully set the twentieth century historical context, surveying productions of plays featuring representations of homosexuality and lesbianism. Lawrence Senelick's *The American Stage* (2010) examines the interplay of gender and sexuality in theatre artists' careers.[16]

In the areas of theory and criticism, the work on gay theatre is more abundant. While many of this research focus mainly on contemporary theatre, their perspectives inform largely this thesis. In her engagements with postmodern theory, Sue-Ellen Case's insistence on the agency of the lesbian subject positioned both inside and outside ideology and able to change the conditions of her existence is central to this study. Jill Dolan's pragmatic theorizations of feminist spectatorship and the dynamics of lesbian desire in various kinds of performance are also especially important to this project. Alan Sinfield, John Clum, David Savran, Robert Vorlicky, David Román, and a host of other scholars who have written key texts in the field, provided leading readings of gay male sexualities in American drama,

[15] Ibid. p. 30.

[16] For more, see Kaier Curtin, *We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians: The Emergence of Lesbians and Gay Men on the American Stage*, (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1987), Nicholas De Jongh, *Not in Front of the Audience: Homosexuality on Stage*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), and Laurence Senelick, *The American Stage: Writing on Theater from Washington Irving to Tony Kushner*, (New York: Library of America, 2010).

theatre and performance.[17]

The main conclusion that emerges from a review of this literature is that this scholarship has been offering numerous examinations of gay individuals as continuously victimized and passive, and consequently, it has been lacking a focussed examination of gay individuals as active and victor, who when represented on stage confront the dominant ideology.[18] The main authors whose most recent work has challenged gay strategies of assimilation are the queer theorists Lee Edelman and Leo Bersani.[19] Both Edelman and Bersani are central to this project in their outlining of a radically uncompromising new ethics of queer theory, urging, queers to abandon the stance of accommodation.

This thesis, in opposition to most of the current scholarship on queer drama, theatre and performance, does not study gay plays as pleas for tolerance and acceptance, reducing queer individuals to outsiders begging at the door of heteronormative life. Instead, this study analyses the challenging power of texts

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[17] See, for example, Sue-Ellen Case, 'Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic', in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject,* ed. by Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), pp. 282-99, Jill Dolan, *Presence and Desire: Essays on Gender, Sexuality, Performance*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), Alan Sinfield, *Out on Stage: Lesbian and Gay Theatre in the Twentieth Century*, (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), John M. Clum, *Still Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama*, (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2000), David Savran, *Taking It Like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism and Contemporary American Culture*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), Robert Vorlicky, *Act Like a Man: Challenging Masculinities in American Drama*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), and David Román, *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and Aids*, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998).

[18] I use the term 'ideology' in the sense of broad intellectual framework. Hence, in the sense used here, it comprises ideas, opinions, values, preconceptions and general mind-set. I am aware of the history of the term as both a Marxist concept, criticising bourgeois ways of thought as false consciousness, and, conversely, as a general term of abuse from conservative elements in society, disparaging any social theory (but in particular Marxist doctrine) as cold intellectual fanaticism. My concern here, however, is with a clash of broad socio-political and philosophical perspectives, based neither on abstraction nor dogma. Hence my use of the term is in no sense ironic or pejorative. It only remains to say that these tendencies may be implicit manifestations of ideology (as in the dramatic texts explored here) or explicit expressions of it (as in the theoretical discourses used to interpret those texts). For more, see, for example, Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

[19] See, for example, Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), and Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave?: And Other Essays*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

considered assimilative, which in fact have a more powerful subversive dimension when considered from a queer perspective. The radical rereading of non-normative masculinities in the selected texts has the potential to be applicable to a critical practice of queering dramatic productions more widely.

Queer Configurations

The overall political efficacy of the 'queer phenomenon', in a simplistic sense, lies in its resistance to any form of rigid definition since, as David Halperin argues, 'the more it verges on becoming a normative academic discipline, the less queer "queer theory" can plausibly claim to be.'[20] And Annamarie Jagose, in her exhaustive study of the concept, also expresses the futility of attempting an overview of queer theory since it 'risks domesticating it' and 'fixing it in ways that queer theory resists fixing itself.'[21] The only real way then to engage with such a slippery concept is to attempt to explore its 'mobility' in relation to the system of sexual categorization and heteronormative ideology against which it divergently reacts. Within this context, 'queer' exhibits as Lee Edelman proposes 'a zone of possibilities' that are subversively 'inflected' by a radical 'potentiality' that it cannot yet articulate.[22]

As a critical paradigm, queer theory has been predominantly associated with lesbian and gay identity, but as Jagose continues, it is far more encompassing of other non-normative identities that do not necessarily fit with contemporary definitions of lesbian and gay:

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[20] David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 113.

[21] Jagose, p. 2.

[22] Lee Edelman, *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 114.

> but its analytic framework also includes such topics as cross-dressing, hermaphroditism, gender ambiguity and gender-corrective surgery. Whether as transvestite performance or academic deconstruction, queer locates and exploits the incoherencies in those three terms which stabilise heterosexuality. Demonstrating the impossibility of any 'natural' sexuality, it calls into question even such apparently unproblematic terms as 'man' and 'woman.'[23]

Queer theory can be seen as one of the most important and controversial developments in sexual/social theory to have emerged in the final decade of the twentieth century. This is precisely due to its monumental attempt to embark upon the seemingly impossible: to enable a process of 'queering' that is specifically aimed at the hegemonic assumptions of a heteronormative 'order of things' that took for granted the 'naturalness' and 'validity' of its own gender and sexual privilege as the basis for all 'normative' social and cultural 'coherence.' However, it is a coherence that can alternatively be seen as provisional, since it is articulated through a variety of often very contradictory ways: either 'unmarked' as the basic idiom of the personal and the social, or 'marked' as a natural state and perpetuated as an ideal 'moral trajectory' for the social subject: '[i]t consists less of norms that could be summarized as a body of doctrine than of a sense of rightness produced in contradictory manifestations - often unconscious, immanent to practice or to institutions.'[24]

Since the early 1970s, and the emergence of gay liberation movements in Western culture and society, there has been a significant development in the study and articulation of gay, lesbian and bisexual subjectivities. While queer theory embraces this body of research and discourse, it resists being characterized in any

[23] Jagose, p. 3.

[24] Teresa De Lauretis, *Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities*, (Bloomington Ind: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. iii.

'simple terms' in relation to such methodologies or disciplinary unities. Queer theory refers to a more diverse body of work that has emerged in a variety of cross-disciplinary contexts, such as sociology and philosophy, literary criticism, cultural studies, postcolonialism, and psychoanalysis, all of which sought to foreground gender and sexuality as key categories through which other social, political and cultural epistemologies are mediated. Sexuality is thus a 'meaningful' activity that is continually negotiated and disseminated, rather than a fixed or natural given.[25]

What is crucial to this queer reclamation of history is the exposition of previously concealed or denied instances of lesbian, gay and non-heteronormative activity. And, synonymous with the postmodern movement from which it has evolved, queer theory is concerned with the collapse of 'grand narratives' and the transformation of ideas about what constitutes 'knowledge', though re-directed quite specifically at gender and sexuality as the after-affects of such heteronormative grand narratives.[26] Equally as slippery a concept to define, postmodernism is generally perceived in terms of a 'crisis' in men's ability to provide an adequate or 'objective' account of 'reality.'[27] Jean-Francois Lyotard proposes that (drawing from Immanuel

[25] See Simon Levay, *City of Friends: A Portrait of the Gay and Lesbian Community in America*, (London and Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995).

[26] See Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984 [1979]).

[27] A full discussion of the terms 'modernity' and 'postmodernity' would exceed the scope of this study. Modernity has been variously equated with the birth of the sovereign subject in Cartesian philosophy (Lyotard), with the project of enlightenment (Habermas), or with the aesthetic modernism of the late nineteenth century. Equally, its contemporary pendant appears as either 'late modernity' (Habermas), 'postmodernisn' (Lyotard) or 'liquid modernity' (Bauman). In relation to theatre and performance, postmodernism has its origin in the restructuring of the entire western world after the Second World War. Factors such as geographical changes in Europe, decolonisation, migration, decentralisation of economical powers, open possibilities for a new form of thinking history. New theorizations and conceptions of power, supported in ethnic or sexual studies, open a place for a redefinition of the body and of the individual, for rethinking its relations with the past and its place in the present. Consequently, the creation in a postmodern theatre of new types of dramatic language, such as the use of non-linear narrative structures, the emphasis upon the body in representation, as well as the experimentalism in the use of time and space, assist the entrance in theatre of other new theoretical approaches that come from disciplines as diverse as anthropology, psychology, semiotics, gender studies and the more recent queer studies, which are all influenced in turn by a new strain of poststructuralist thought. After a period clearly influenced by realism, the 1950s was a decade of rupture and transition to an alternative theatre: 1952 is the year of the first pluridisciplinary

Kant's notion of the 'sublime' in the *Critique of Judgement)* the postmodern can be characterized as a 'mode of expression' that attempts to project new ways of articulating or interpreting 'experience'; ways that transcend the limitations of traditional conventions of modernity that embodied a desire for unity by alternatively celebrating fragmentation. Focus, therefore, shifts from a concern for an essential sense of 'being' to an analysis of 'appearance', that foregrounds the contingency of knowledge (appropriated by queer to include perceptions of gender, identity and sexuality). By foregrounding difference and fragmentation as a critical framework for exploring a queer epistemology or mode of organization, queer theorists thus map a change that is also characteristic of poststructuralism, as Donald Morton writes:

> [r]ather than as a local effect, the return of the queer has to be understood as the result, in the domain of sexuality, of the (post) modern encounter with – and rejection of – Enlightenment views concerning the role of the conceptual, rational, systematic, structural, normative, progressive, liberatory, revolutionary, and so forth, in social change.[28]

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experiences of John Cage at the Black Mountain College; 1958 is the year of the great promulgation of the translated version of *Le Théâtre et son Double* (1938) by Antonin Artaud; and this is also the year that the Off-Off-Broadway space first appears in New York, as a reaction to the shading off of the frontiers between Broadway and Off-Broadway theatre (Michael Vanden Heuvel, *Performing Drama/Dramatizing Performance - Alternative Theater and the Dramatic Text*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993 [1991]), p. 28). Essential for this new phase of experimentation in the performative arts is the arrival in America of the French poststructuralist theories. Derrida explains about aspects of writing deconstruction and fragmentation throughout the 1960s and 1970s; Deleuze presents, through the concepts of schizophrenia and rhisomatic construction, theories about simultaneity and the creation of a new conception of reality; and Barthes explores concepts of citation and intertextuality. Alternatively, it through architecture's theoretical discourse – arguably the origin of the 'postmodernism' concept – that notions of vision and space are initially introduced into postmodern thinking. As a result of all these contributions, elements such as deconstruction, the multiple, plurality and the affirmation of place in relation to time, come to be contemplated in the theatre and performance of the 1960s and 1970s. For an overview over definitions of modernity and postmodernism see, for example, David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change.*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989).

[28] Donald E. Morton, *Post-Ality: Marxism and Postmodernism*, (Washington, D.C.: Maisonneuve Press, 1995), p. 370.

As a critical paradigm, queer is not only the product of a specifically 'lesbian and gay theory', but rather informed by 'historically specific knowledges which constitute late twentieth-century western thought.'[29] Poststructuralism as a discourse envisages a 'subject-in-process' whose shifting position within language is indefinable within traditional theories of knowledge or 'truth' (such as structuralist, Marxist and feminist theories that are anchored or premised by 'enlightenment' epistemologies). Influenced by Roland Barthes' re-writing of 'metalinguistic' mythology, Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytical revisions of 'subjectivity' and Foucault's scepticism of the 'genealogies of knowledge' and sexuality, these ideas marked a radical break with the concepts and values of humanist discourse and the illusion of 'autonomy.' Poststructuralism, therefore, envisaged a potentially liberated space of 'plural' and 'decentred' subject positions, where identity can no longer be defined in relation to 'essentialist' ideas of gender, class, or racial affiliation. It can thus be perceived as a particularly post-Marxist movement that acknowledges the 'diversity' of contemporary social perspectives, rather than the more 'metanarrative' supposition that privileges one perspective (ie. classical Marxism) to articulate the unquestionable 'truth of history' (with socioeconomic/class hierarchies as the central issue). The subject is hence seen as 'dispersed' over a range of multiple positions and discourses, which challenge any position that claims to 'speak' on behalf of an oppressed subjectivity, since this singular articulation is merely the 'product' of the subject's place within a range of pre-existing discourses. Poststructuralism, in contrast, advocates a 'free-play' of signification and the possibility that subjects are enabled to adopt a number of 'performative' roles (a key element of queer theory). By achieving this break with oppressive norms (naturalized or realist), gender and

[29] Jagose, p. 77.

identity could be seen to be 'liberated' from their fixed association with a hetero-patriarchal law and an unquestioned 'classical realism.' Poststructuralist shifts can also be located within both feminist and postcolonial discourses that problematize notions of femininity and race as unified, coherent and stable categories from within a similarly queer discursive matrix. All of these debates have had a significant impact upon lesbian and gay studies, and provide the theoretical context from which queer theory is derived, as Jagose argues:

> the post-structuralist theorisation of identity as provisional and contingent, coupled with a growing awareness of the limitations of identity categories in terms of political representation, enabled queer to emerge as a new form of personal identification and political organisation. 'Identity' is probably one of the most naturalised cultural categories each of us inhabits: one always thinks of one's *self* as existing outside all representational frames, and as somehow marking a point of undeniable realness.[30]

Queer theory, therefore, articulates a challenge to the very regime of sexuality itself and the knowledges that construct the self as 'essentially' gendered, or presume heterosexuality and homosexuality as natural binarisms that denote the inherent 'truth' of sexual identity. Queer theorists regard heterosexuality and homosexuality as not simply identities or social statuses, but as categories of power, discourse and knowledge that shape moral boundaries and political hierarchies, framing our perceptions of the body, desire, sexuality and identity:

> [q]ueer theorists argue that identities are always multiple or at best composites with literally an infinite number of ways in which 'identity-components' (eg. sexual

[30] Ibid. pp. 77-78.

> orientation, race, class, nationality, gender, age, able-ness) can intersect or combine. Any specific identity construction, moreover, is arbitrary, unstable, and exclusionary. Identity constructions necessarily entail the silencing or exclusion of some experiences or forms of life.[31]

The works of French philosopher Michel Foucault have played a crucial role in this pre-queer process of denaturalising the dominant discourses of sexual identity. By proposing sexual identity as an effect of power rather than a natural or essentialist given, his work had a major impact upon lesbian, gay and later queer scholarship.

As Diana Fuss argues, Foucault's writings clearly anticipate 'current disputes amongst gay theorists and activists over the meaning and applicability of such categories as 'gay', 'lesbian', and 'homosexual' in a poststructuralist climate which renders all such assertions of identity problematic.'[32]

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[31] Michael Warner, *Fear of a Queer Planet,* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. viii.

[32] Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference*, (New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 97. This debate over the discursive production of sexuality was part of a much wider project for Foucault which contended that 'modern subjectivity' is merely an effect of 'networks of power.' And yet, he also argued that this network of power is not necessarily repressive in nature (see M. Foucault, 'Truth and Power: Interview with Alessandro Fontano and Pasquale Pasquino', in *Michel Foucault: Power, Truth, Strategy,* (Sydney: Feral Publications, 1979), pp. 29-48 (p. 36). By perceiving power as productive and enabling (rather than fundamentally repressive) Foucault thus exposed the interdependence of power and resistance, which subsequently provided an opportunity for multiple discursive strategies of 'dissidence': 'we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that come into play in various strategies' (M. Foucault, 'What Is an Author?', in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. by David Lodge (London: Longman, 1988), pp. 197-210 (p. 122). To demonstrate how discourses can be used 'strategically' for oppositional aims, Foucault specifically foregrounds how the category of 'homosexuality' was formulated in relation to such a power/resistance dynamic: '[t]here 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, pederasty, and 'psychic hermaphrodism' made possible a strong advance of social controls into this 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' (ibid. p. 110). Concepts of 'the body' and 'sexuality' have persistently been sites of moral and political struggle within the past century, and moral concern over such issues as promiscuity, abortion, masturbation, prostitution, obscenity and sex education led to the urgent rise of sexology, psychoanalysis and psychiatry to 'make sense' of such deviant transgressions. 'Homosexuality', therefore, came into being as an object of knowledge through the dissemination of such discourses on morality and subjectivity. However, despite attempts to view the modern human condition as socially constructed,

From the early part of the twentieth century to the mid-seventies, homoerotic desire has consistently been defined and articulated through scientific/medical discursive frameworks as indicative of a distinct ontological and sexual identity – 'the homosexual.' The early homosexual was framed as a unique 'type' of (malformed) person, but the redefinition of homosexual desires into a shifting homosexual/lesbian/gay/queer paradigm has evolved in relation to a significant change in the meanings and perceptions of homosexuality in society. The first part of the century was dominated by a specifically psychiatric framework that defined the homosexual as insane, perverse and abnormal. Yet, the challenge posed to this model by Alfred Kinsey (1948), viewed sexuality as more of a 'continuum.'[33] Human sexuality was thus proposed as essentially ambiguous with respect to sexual orientation, and that most individuals had the 'potential' to experience both hetero

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the conclusions drawn by such sexo-linguistic discourses offered no real account of the construction of modern bodies and sexualities. Rather, they merely relied upon popular psychoanalytical frameworks that merely medicalized such conditions as symptomatic of abnormalities of the brain or physical deficiency, thereby unquestioning the validity of a hetero-patriarchal symbolic order that ascribes such 'unnatural' behaviour as anomalous and 'lacking.' This 'silence' and apparent disavowal of classical sociology towards sexuality can, as Steven Seidman states, begin to be seen as 'related to their privileged gender and sexual social position […] just as the bourgeoisie asserts the naturalness of class inequality and their rule, individuals whose social identity is that of male and heterosexual do not question the naturalness of a male-dominated, normatively heterosexual social order […]. Moreover, their own science of society contributed to the making of this regime whose center is the hetero/homo binary and the heterosexualization of society' (Steven Seidman, *Queer Theory/Sociology*, (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996), p. 4). Adopting a constructionist position, Foucault argues that homosexuality is primarily a modern identity formation, and that whilst there was evidence of same-sex 'acts' there was not, however, a corresponding identity category. He asserted the much more provocative premise that in 1870 the category of 'the homosexual' as a distinct identity, emerged as a 'product' of the medical discourses that formulated it: '[w]e must not forget that the psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was characterized – Westphal's famous article of 1870 on 'contrary sexual sensations' can stand as its date of birth - less by a type of sexual relations than by a certain quality of sexual sensibility, a certain way of inverting the masculine and feminine in oneself' (Foucault, p. 43). From 1870 then, same-sex acts began to be perceived quite unquestionably as 'evidence' of a particular 'type' of 'species', and around whom particular discourses began to evolve: '[t]he sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species' (ibid. p. 43). What is interesting, however, is Foucault's total disregard for gender within such a paradigm, or even an awareness of the inherently masculinist bias in his writings (the lesbian identity is commonly disavowed). Despite this bias, many of his works have ironically played a vital role in the formulation of recent feminist and lesbian critiques, and formed the critical base from which Judith Butler's ground-breaking *Gender Trouble* (1990) evolved. Alternatively, 'heterosexuality' as a category has received little theoretical attention until its recent queer deconstruction (such as Jonathan Katz's *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, which owes much to Foucault's debates on the 'origins' of homosexuality).

[33] See Alfred C. Kinsey, Wardell Baxter Pomeroy, and Clyde E. Martin, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, (Philadelphia,: W. B. Saunders Co., 1948).

and homo-sexual desire (as Freud himself concluded in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* in 1905). New social 'models' of homosexuality had also started to emerge which emphasized (and promoted) the homosexual as an 'oppressed minority' in relation to a dominant 'heterosexual majority', and projected a hierarchical power dichotomy that has dominated sexual discourse ever since: the hetero/homo binary.

Following the historic Stonewall riots of 1969, the seventies saw the arrival of the gay liberation movement, which sought to create 'sophisticated social understandings of homosexuality.'[34] Images of homosexual desire and identity were thus re-iterated as 'normal and natural', and social discourse placed emphasis upon oppression, prejudice, and the creation and promotion of a distinctively 'ethnic' gay sub-culture. Generally, cultural assumptions viewed the homosexual as a strangely 'exotic' persona, in contrast to the 'normative' and hence more legitimate heterosexual. The label-constructing ideas of 'deviance' theorists such as Howard Becker or Erving Goffman were influential in re-shaping knowledges of sexuality (homosexuality in particular), and a whole new area of academic research was established as 'self-identified' gay and lesbian researchers contributed to the emergence of 'Gay and Lesbian Studies.'[35] However, these academics did not attempt to fully question the social consequences of the hetero/homosexual binary as a central legitimising category of modern sexuality, but moreover tended to perpetuate it in order to consolidate homosexuality as a natural subordinate alternative to the 'norm.'

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[34] Seidman, p. 7.

[35] See Howard Saul Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*, (New York: Free Press, 1966), and Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, (London: Penguin, 1990 [1959]).

The establishment of newly empowered and affirmative gay politics inevitably led to the formation of 'community', and a concerted need emerged for heightened cultural visibility: but more importantly led to the evolution of 'social constructionism.' Derivative of label theory, phenomenology, and heavily influenced by Marxism and feminism, social constructionist perspectives were firmly engrained within critical discourses of 'identity.' Social constructionism (also influenced by poststructuralism) challenged the very nature of sex and society, suggesting that homosexuality was far from a uniformly fixed phenomenon, but that its meaning and role varied in relation to the paradigmatic shifts and epistemological developments of history. The notion of the homosexual as a 'trans-historical' seemingly universal identity, rarely questioned by the lesbian-feminists or gay liberationists, appeared to be quite a unique idea of modern occidental society. As Foucault remarked:

> [a]s defined by ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them. The nineteenth century homosexual became a personage, a past, and a case history, a life form […]. Nothing that went into total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions […] because it was a secret that always gave itself away.[36]

Foucault's anti-identitarian writings found much support from social constructionists, who attempted to re-define the changing meanings and formations of the 'modern' homosexual. However, even though these perspectives sought to challenge essentialist perspectives on homosexuality, they eventually contributed, as Seidman re-iterates, 'to a politics of the making of a homosexual minority.'[37]

[36] Foucault, p. 43.
[37] Seidman, p. 9.

Constructionist debates on essentialism have since become institutionalized by the lesbian and gay studies movements of the 1980s and 1990s, since they legitimated a model of lesbian and gay subculture as an ethnic-like (more legitimate) minority subject formation. These essentialist debates which focused upon changing social patterns became the core concern for most subsequent lesbian and gay theories. However, the affirmative identities and emancipatory communities that had been founded upon and enforced by much of these liberationist politics in the 1970s and early 1980s were soon to face a devastating crisis in the aftermath of AIDS.

In the mid-1980s, an anti-gay movement re-emerged that vehemently and relentlessly revised and re-appropriated the traditionally regressive moral, medical and religious models that condemned and equated homosexuality with disease and death. And yet, this resurgence of prejudice and bigotry also achieved the opposite in that it initiated a defiant and defensive response, that re-deployed the post-Stonewall strategies of social confrontation and revisionism. Internal conflicts that had developed over the decades of 'community-building' within gay culture were finally foregrounded and debated, evoking a shift in direction of gay theory and politics that placed problematic divisions and exclusions at the forefront of all discussion surrounding the construction of mainstream gay culture. The assertion of a fixed and uniform lesbian and gay identity that functioned as a utopian template for political organization and the foundation of community, was vehemently criticized for reflecting and perpetuating a homogenously white, male, middle-class gay ontology, wherein the categories of lesbian and gay function as restrictively disciplined, but more importantly, exclusionary models. These conflicts resulted in a more constructionist approach to gay politics that re-focused a 'politics of difference.' Influenced by postmodernism, poststructuralism and Lacanian psychoanalysis, the

queer theorist emerged to offer a new perspective on lesbian and gay theory and politics:

> [q]ueer marks both a continuity and a break with previous gay liberationist and lesbian feminist models. Lesbian feminist models of organisation were correctives to the masculine bias of a gay liberation which itself had grown out of dissatisfactions with earlier homophile organisations. Similarly, queer effects a rupture which, far from being absolute, is meaningful only in the context of its historical development.[38]

Since its 'arrival' in the early 1990s (which is debateable given its derivative nature), queer theory has acquired multiple meanings and definitions, from an umbrella term to consolidate and address all gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender experience, to a theoretical approach that is underpinned by anarchic performative transgression and revisionist dissent. However, what is central to queer theory is the relentless desire to challenge dominant concepts of both negative and positive homosexual discourse; a discourse that has presumed an essential homosexual 'subject', stable, unified and identifiable. By approaching identity constructs as multiple, unstable and regulatory, the queer theorist thus seeks to present (albeit contentiously) new and productive possibilities and perspectives that encourage the exposition of 'difference', thereby attempting to articulate the multiple, fragmented voices, agendas and interests that shape queer life and politics:

> [q]ueer theory is suggesting that the study of homosexuality should not be a study of a minority – the making of the lesbian/gay/bisexual subject – but a study of those knowledges and social practices that organize 'society' as a whole by sexualising –

[38] Jagose, p. 75.

> heterosexualizing or homosexualizing – bodies, desires, acts, identities, social relations, knowledges, culture and social institutions. Queer theory aspires to transform homosexual theory into a general social theory or one standpoint from which to analyse social dynamics.[39]

Poststructuralist queer theory hence ideally envisages a culture of sexual difference and fluidity, rather than the narrowly defined gay and lesbian liberationism. It analyses the social production of all sexual categories and meanings, traces their interrelational dependency and, therefore, reveals the formation and operation of heteronormativity (as a contentiously fixed concept within the queer paradigm) which is placed at the forefront of queer study and critique. Queer perspectives propose to reveal the unstable and performative aspects of identity, and identity's deployment as a regulatory tool of control. By decentring the nature of identity (and the heterocentric matrix through which it is filtered), gender and sexuality become merely linguistic and psycho-social strategies that are theatrically and dramatically produced through behaviour and gesture; projected and re-enacted through innumerable repetitive actions that exist within a field of shifting, fluid meanings. From a queer perspective, even the 'act' of 'coming out' (and thus entering the 'gay symbolic order') is no longer regarded as a positive or emancipatory endeavour, but rather a process of construction or the performative re-iteration of a phantasmatic sexual identity and ideology. By 'coming out' one is merely 'entering in' to a heteronormative system of signification and an oppressive regime of power and control (as articulated through the queer paradigm).

[39] Seidman, p. 13.

As an academic movement, queer theory was first cited (though not exclusively) as a developing critical philosophy through a number of prominent conferences in north America in the early 1990s:

> [q]ueer theory became a rallying cry for new ways of thinking and theorizing. For many the term 'lesbian and gay studies' did not seem inclusive enough; it did not encapsulate the ambivalence toward sexual categorization which many lesbian/gay scholars felt, and the difficulties they faced in fitting sexuality into the 'ethnicity model' which provided the template for such fields as African-American and women's studies, and indeed for identity politics in general.[40]

The increasingly visible presence of confrontational post-AIDS queer political organizations during the past decade, in the form of Queer Nation and ACT UP, has provided queer theory with a fairly public stage for these anti-essentialist debates. And yet, it was the deployment of the term 'queer' itself that provoked much of the controversy and confusion associated with this 'new' critical paradigm.

The shift from gay/lesbian to queer was originally perceived as an inclusionary attempt at unity, since it ideally sought to remove exclusive sexual labels and separatist boundaries, to include previously contentious bisexual and transgender identities in a form of utopian political cohesion. The 'queer' of such movements as Queer Nation reclaimed the term as a form of emancipation, self-empowerment and the enforcement of 'in-your-face' methodologies – 'We're here, we're queer, get used to it!!!.' The term was ideally understood by advocates of queer theory to have been 'erased' of its use as a traditionally homophobic insult, and its connotation appropriated (though highly problematically) to re-signify renewed

[40] A. Stein & K. Plummer, 'I Can't Even Think Straight': "Queer" Theory and the Missing Sexual Revolution in Sociology', in *Queer Theory/Sociology*, ed. by Steven Seideman (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996), p. 113.

lesbian and gay identities and polemics. Yet, as Sedgwick discusses, there was much dissent over this uncertain and rather overly-simplistic 'erasure' of the pejorative significations of the term: 'there are some lesbians and gays who could never count as queer, and other people who vibrate to the chord of queer without having much same-sex eroticism, or without routing their same-sex eroticism through the identity labels lesbian or gay.'[41]

Within the (seemingly detached) context of academia, new queer theorists also exhibited a rather tense, uncertain attitude to this new political use of the term. Teresa de Lauretis, for example, one of the founding voices in queer academic discourse, publicly distanced herself from the appropriation of the word by Queer Nation:

> [t]he term queer was suggested to me by a conference in which I had participated and whose proceedings will be published in the forthcoming volume, ed. By Douglas Crimp and the Bad Object Choices, *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video*. My queer, however, had no relation to the Queer Nation group, of whose existence I was ignorant at the time […] there is in fact very little in common between Queer Nation and this queer theory.[42]

Intellectuals such as de Lauretis, Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick, claim to have created a theory that is 'quintessentially queer', and yet it is also a theory that is constructed, rather, from a lesbian-feminist context (thus redressing the masculine bias of gay theory) which problematizes the location of a queer male standpoint from within such a model.

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[41] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Queer Performativity: Henry James's "The Art of the Novel"', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 1 (1993), 13.

[42] De Lauretis, p. iii.

Queer theory, however, as an academic discipline, has provoked an explosion of research and publication on such previously ignored subjects as drag to S&M, but it consistently attempts to detach itself from any actual connection with the 'real' lives of those individuals who identify with such transgender/sexual/drag queen/sado-masochistic positions.[43]

[43] Queer theory discursively refuses the ontological existence of such subjectivities, by formulating a division between the performance of identity and its essential actuality. Gender identity is thus performatively enacted whilst a sexual identity is categorized as a form of fluid monosexuality. Queer theorists are not satisfied with merely analysing lesbian and gay communities as exclusive sites of sexual difference, but rather seek to interrogate the very nature of gender and sexual binarisms (and the performative nature of such notions) in order to deconstruct or revise traditional epistemologies and cultural 'texts' that had previously been assembled through heterosexual codes and discursive strategies. This is a process that would inevitably re-apply common perceptions on the 'nature' of deviancy to the institution of 'heterosexuality' itself. The influence of Foucault has been credited by many from within queer culture as the catalyst for the emergence of queer theory from a gay academic subculture and into the populist academic mainstream. In collaboration with the rise of postmodernism and poststructuralism, queer theorists can be seen as radically leading the way in cultural and theoretical innovation, particularly in the arts and humanities. Similarly, postmodern theory as a critical philosophy is commonly regarded as 'playful' and 'self-ironizing' in nature, in much the same way as queer culture has adopted camp, drag and other performative strategies to celebrate alienation and anarchy. Postmodernists foreground the illusory nature of systems of rationality and 'truth' in much the same fashion as the queer, and the multiple uses of the term displays a diversity of meanings and definitions akin to that of queer theory. Like queer, postmodernism is an aesthetic discourse that seeks to overcome the limitations of traditional heteronormative realist conventions and hence articulate new strategies for interpreting 'experience' and 'society.' Queer theorists have often acknowledged the extent to which the texts of mass culture shape and define our understanding of sexuality, though some have also regarded this as a weakness in that such analyses rarely move beyond 'the text' and notions of queer protocols of reading: '[t]here is a dangerous tendency for the new queer theorists to ignore 'real' queer life as it is materially experienced across the world, while they play with the free-floating signifiers of the texts. What can the re-reading of a nineteenth-century novel really tell us about the pains of gay Chicanos or West Indian lesbians now, for example? Indeed, such postmoderm readings may well tell us more about the lives of middle class radical intellectuals than about anything else' (Plummer, pp. 137-38). Although queer theory is commonly utilized to attempt a de-ghettoizing of queer concerns, it is at times problematically over-burdened with theoretical jargon which thus limits access to those outside a knowledge of such discursive frameworks, thereby alienating those it seeks to liberate. It is also regarded by some critics as merely a trend: 'just the latest progeny spawned by the Foucauldian Revolution and adopted by over-eager literary critics and proponents of cultural studies' or as merely a version of capitalist ideology that compares such sexual 'choices' to shopping for the latest brand name product (Steven Epstein, 'A Queer Encounter: Sociology and the Study of Sexuality', in *Queer Theory/Sociology*, ed. by Steven Seideman (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996), (p. 145). This negative attitude towards queer theory's subversive potential is also manifest in the cross-generational differences and conflicts within the lesbian/gay/queer community. Younger queers (the ideal demographic for such 'capitalist' queer idealism) tend to be more open to exploring such a revisionist theory, since it articulates the dissatisfaction felt with established and restrictive lesbian and gay codes and demarcations (but also marks their privileged position in the post-stigmatized climate of the 1990s). Whereas older gays and lesbians, on the other hand, vehemently object to the appropriation of such a pejorative term. 'Queer' not only denotes their past struggles against oppression and prejudice, but also actively seeks to undermine and repudiate their achievements over the past twenty-five years, and deconstruct the very community that they have so tirelessly constructed in the face of such oppression. In subject matter, queer studies tend to place emphasis (perhaps reductively) upon artistic, cultural and literary texts, in order to expose their deployment as the re-iterative mechanisms of

The liberation of queer identity is however problematic in that it can be seen to presume that the 'regimes' of heteronormativity and heterosexuality are rigidly fixed in comparison. However, the ease by which such categories are transgressed or open to a 'queering' strategy, and the tenuousness of performative iterations of power, thus demonstrate the instability and fluidity that is already inherent within such a conceptualization. Queer could, therefore, be seen as a highly tenuous and contentious framework in itself, since it is only able to project its liberatory and fluid potential if it simultaneously inscribes the heteronormative as rigid and oppressive. It is hence just as inter-dependent upon the imposed iterative strategies that it seeks to deconstruct, and could be seen to be merely setting itself up as another binary formation that only has meaning in relation to its more rigid counter-part. However,

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society as it seeks to represent and reproduce itself. Queer theory does, however, acknowledge the problem or even impossibility of moving outside common conceptions of sexuality, since each of these terms comes into being in relation to each other. The aim of queer theory then is to 'negotiate its limits', and explore the implications and sublime pleasures of transgression (see Diana Fuss, *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, (London: Routledge, 1991). The inevitable political dilemma posed by queer perspectives is, of course, the undermining effect it has upon the legitimacy of gay politics. The act of 'conceding to difference' can be regarded as a destructive endeavour, since the political strength of a social movement is dependent upon unitary identity and solidarity. By acknowledging multiplicity and ephemerality, stability and political effectiveness are thus jeopardized. The deconstructive queer position may disturb heteronormative ideas about sexuality, but it lacks the necessary effectiveness of a cohesive institutional basis from which to initiate and strategize a concrete political intervention. As Joshua Gamson warns: '[y]et queer theory and politics tend to run past a critique of the particular, concrete forces that make sexual identity, in stabilised and binary form, a basis for discipline, regulation, pleasure, and political empowerment. In the hurry to deconstruct identity, they tend to 'slide into viewing identity itself as the fulcrum of domination and its subversion as the center of an anti-identity politic' (Seidman, 132); the politic becomes overwhelmingly cultural, textual, and subjectless. Deconstructive strategies remain quite deaf and blind to the very concrete and violent institutional forms to which the most logical answer is resistance in and through a particular collective identity' (Joshua Gamson, 'Must Identity Movements Self-Destruct?: A Queer Dilemma', in *Queer Theory/Sociology*, ed. by Steven Seideman (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 408-09). In effect, there is a fundamental paradox at play in queer theory because, within such a volatile and oppressive political climate, clearly defined identity categories are problematically both necessary and counter-productive; and attempts to either fix or de-stabilize them are equally important from a number of variable perspectives. Whereas queer theorists have argued that such a radical re-inscription of nomenclature could 'transform cultural assumptions and knowledge', their opponents have similarly argued that 'merely to change the semantic value of queer is to misrecognize a symptom for the disease', and that even if the redeployment and resignification of the term were to prove effective 'other words or neologisms would take on the cultural work it once did' (Jagose, p. 104.) So, even though these attempts at re-clamation of queer as a positive term can be seen as progressive in intent, they are also contentious since they are, as Jagose remarks, 'neither absolute nor uncontestable': '[e]ven though queer has been appropriated by a new generation, which recognizes itself in that term without equivocation, homophobia is not going to be rendered speechless or lack an intelligible vocabulary with which to make itself understood' (ibid. pp. 104-05).

as long as queer signifies a resistance to the regimes of heteronormativity, its immunity to domestication guarantees its capacity to maintain a critical relation to standards of 'normativity.'[44]

Queer Representations

From an artistic point of view, as far as performance theory and practice is concerned, a queer perspective is an intriguing (though highly complex) path to take for theatrical exploration and experimentation. Intriguing, since the apparent 'freedom' of interpretation and possibility it proposes, in theory, envisages a variety of innovative approaches to form and content, semiological/discursive structures, and commonly accepted notions of gender/sexual signification within contemporary postmodern forms of performance. It would, therefore, be an ideal (or even necessary) process by which to attempt to put into practice such a complex and volatile critical framework: 'It is those performers who explode the seamless body of humanist discourse and slip out of such naturalized categories who pose the greatest threat.'[45]

It is through theatre that the emerging lesbian and gay perspectives of the 1970s and 1980s were given a public forum for controversial sexual debate, which with the synonymous rise of a socialist trend in theatre led to the establishment of openly gay theatre groups, and the realization of the political force of such public debate.

Political theatre groups successfully attempted to reflect and transform the theoretical and political epistemologies of the time, thereby perceiving of themselves as initiators of social and ideological change. The live and confrontational nature of

[44] Warner, p. xxvi.
[45] Lynda Hart, *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press., 1994), p. 27.

theatrical performance was the perfect medium for uniting the artist and the spectator in a public event that fused art with politics; it thus (seemingly) provided a forum for previously oppressed artists to develop greater artistic freedom and political control over their work. Works emerged that sought to challenge and re-evaluate the conventional demarcations between individual self-expression and political self-interest. From the very beginnings of gay liberation in the late 1960s, theatrical self-expression and performativity were crucial elements for projecting a visible movement by adopting street theatre protests and spectacular demonstrations of 'deviance.' Alternative identities were hence being empowered and enacted, performed and celebrated in their many guises.

An emancipated notion of 'gay pride' had asserted itself not merely as a transient ghettoist trend, but as a serious desire for the gay community to represent and explore itself upon the stage without having to apologize for its existence, or adopt the traditional mode of self-deprecation and camp disavowal.

Early gay theatre became a 'collective', wherein its members were able to democratically control all aspects of their work, from form and content to tour planning, design and dissemination. Collective devising was, as Michelene Wandor discusses in her introduction to *Strike While the Iron is Hot* (one of the very first to document the work of such political theatre), the most effective method by which to 'represent an intense movement towards a peak of consciousness at a particular historical moment.'[46] Subject matter was presented to audiences that either supported and connected with their own experiences, or challenged their assumptions. Performances were commonly followed by discussions, thus demystifying the space/boundary between performer and audience, but more importantly 'making the

[46] Michelene Wandor, *Strike Wile the Iron Is Hot*, (London: Journeyman, 1980), p. 10.

political conscious-raising which followed a performance something which was also shared, thus helping to politicize the theatre-going process itself.'[47]

Approaches to form played an extremely important role in early gay theatre, since there was an urgent need to locate a common point of identification with its audience:

> [g]ay theater has many valuable stories to share with the world; stories about self discovery, about being fundamentally different from what everyone around one appears to be, about growing up to be radically different from one's parents, about forming relationships in which the rules have to be made up as one goes along. The best gay plays transcend these elements, as does all art that transforms the particular into the universal, but even those that don't still have an important social value that must not be underestimated.[48]

Theatre (irrespective of the dominance of television and cinema) has continually provided the means by which a community (in whatever form) can 'get together and talk about itself.'[49] No matter how simplistic the form or content, an organized gay theatre/text consistently functions to affirm the existence of a subordinate minority: 'acting as corrective to neglect or abuse by the culture-at-large.'[50] However, there are evident differences between the representative images of gay men and lesbians in post-liberation independent theatre than those within earlier mainstream theatre. Since nineteenth and twentieth century psychiatric research into homosexuality was based upon a negative, or a purportedly 'neutral' academic perspective, it is hardly surprising to discover that a pre-liberation theatre that

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[47] Ibid. p. 10.
[48] Don Shewey, *Out Front: Contemporary Gay and Lesbian Plays*, (New York: Grove Press, 1988), p. xi.
[49] Ibid. p. xi.
[50] Ibid. p. xi.

focused upon homosexuality as subject matter, focused upon the redundant procreative negativity and psycho-sociological tragedy of such a predicament to the heterocentric (yet equally 'perverse') norm. When homosexuality did dare to reveal itself (albeit rarely in explicit terms) upon the stage, it was usually in relation to overly melodramatic forms of contrived social drama and scandal. 'The Homosexual' was perpetually portrayed as tortured and pathetic and thus disavowed any real social threat to the seemingly detached infrastructures of heteronormativity.

However, in the post-Stonewall climate of the 1970s, a form of distinctively queer theatre emerged from the avant-garde and the 'underground' that was relentlessly 'devoted to total outrageousness.'[51] Camp performative excess and the spectacle of perversity became the specialities of such emerging figures as Ronald Tavel, John Vaccaro and Charles Ludlam, whose Ridiculous Theatre Company established a new tradition in camp/drag theatre. Experimental works, namely from the radical American lesbian performance group Split Britches, also began to articulate approaches to identity, performance and the deconstruction of the gendered body in performance. By rejecting the rules of a mainstream theatre (the extent to which is highly debateable), gay artists were given the valuable opportunity to un-self-consciously develop and explore their own life narratives, and the diversity and inconsistency of the gay under-culture: 'the history of the homosexual in drama is the history of the shifts in the dominant society's perception of repression, otherness, the politics of the unconscious, ideology, and power. These are the very issues central to gay drama.'[52]

Yet, whilst queer theorists have consistently cited examples from theatre and performance to support and expand their analyses, queer theory has also made a

[51] Ibid. p. xi.
[52] Ibid. p. xi.

similar impact upon the work of performance theorists such as Sue Ellen Case, Jill Dolan and Lynda Hart. Case, in particular, advocates the efficacy of 'queer performativity' as articulated by Eve Sedgwick and Judith Butler, wherein the fusion of the terms 'queer' and 'performativity' effectively 'focus several critical anxieties that the departure from the troubled territories of "lesbian" and "performance" seeks to allay.'[53] Discussing the differences between the Butler and Sedgwick definitions of queer performativity in relation to performance, Case argues:

> '[q]ueer' occurs within 'performativity', which Butler in the earlier article defines as evacuating 'performance' by denying 'a prior and volitional subject'; in fact, as she would have it, 'performative' 'constitutes as an effect the very subject it appears to express' [Butler, 1991: 24]. Unlike Sedgwick's, Butler's sense of performativity sets out to contradict traditional agitprop or Brechtian theatrical strategies that encourage actors and spectators alike to imagine themselves as an agent of change. Butler gives over that agency to a 'reiterated acting that is power in its persistence and instability […] a nexus of power and discourse that repeats or mimes the discursive gestures of power.'[54]

There is a paradox at play in queer performance, therefore, that proposes an active queer performer who adopts a Brechtian approach to performance (that seeks to foreground the constructedness and iterative structures that are being exposed in the character represented in the text), in conflict with a queer articulation of 'identity' that seeks to illegitimize the authorial intervention of an essential performer.[55]

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[53] Sue-Ellen Case, *Split Britches: Lesbian Practice/Feminist Performance*, (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 13.

[54] Ibid. p. 15.

[55] In *Gender Trouble*, Butler quite effectively elaborates upon Foucault's thesis of the 'operations of power and resistance', in order to illustrate how 'marginalized identities' are 'complicit with those identificatory regimes they seek to counter' (Jagose, p. 83). Rather than naturalising same-sex desire in the same way as lesbian and gay theoretical frameworks, Butler alternatively contests the 'truth' of gender itself as the performative effect of re-iterative 'acts': '[t]he cultural matrix through

The impact of queer theory on the nature of sexual discourse is evident in the work of a number of current artists who, until recently (or in some cases consistently), have regarded themselves and their work as distinctly gay or lesbian (or even straight). However, even though such post-constructionist approaches are common to contemporary queer work, the artists still tend to place their own subjective autobiographies and individually (homo) sexualized bodies at the core of the reading process, thus evoking conflict in the sites of contact and departure between queer linguistics and corporeal delineation.

This way of working could be regarded as the point of origin of a new 'postqueer' perspective in performance (traces of which are also residually evident in recent queer cinema and theory). Within such work, the queer perspective and

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which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of 'identities' cannot 'exist' – that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not 'follow' from either sex or gender […]. Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being' (ibid. p. 83). Similar to Foucault's focus upon the importance of discursive strategies and their revisionist potential, Butler perceives gender as 'an ongoing discursive practice […] open to intervention and resignification' (Butler, p. 33), and as Jagose surmises: 'heterosexuality, which passes itself off as natural and therefore in no need of explanation, is reframed by Butler as a discursive production, an effect of the sex/gender system which purports merely to describe it' (Jagose, p. 84). Although Butler is concerned with all 'performatives' that repeat 'laws of difference', she does tend to focus upon drag as a practice in particular, since it 'reinflects heterosexual norms within a gay context': '[a]s much as drag creates a unified picture of 'woman' […] it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. *In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency.* Indeed, part of the pleasure, the giddiness of the performance is in the recognition of a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of causal unities that are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary' (Butler, pp. 137-38). However, in her next book, *Bodies That Matter*, Butler questions this tendency by queer theorists to consider performativity only in terms of theatricality and drag, which is reductive in that it implies a 'conscious' theatrical agency. Whereas she perceives performativity far more problematically as 'neither free play nor theatrical self-presentation; nor can it simply be equated with performance': '[p]erformativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed *by* a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject. This iterability implies that 'performance' is not a singular 'act' or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production, but not, I will insist, determining it fully in advance' (Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2007 [1993]), p. 95). And yet, as Case contends, this tension between queer performativity and performance is thus productive, as illustrated by 'Butler's decision to accept (mis) readings of her own writing', since its resulting efficacy lies in the fact that '[q]ueer, then, moves identity to readership, and "performativity" imbues writing with performance' (Case, p. 17).

aesthetic is explored more as a form of acknowledged utopian impossibility. And so, intrinsic sexual preferences or objects of desire (mainly same-sex) are not challenged or dislocated in the body of the work, but merely form the basis for experimentation, reinscription and playful address within the context of liberated artistic expression.

Texts are thus created that challenge the normalcy of heterosexuality as a power/defining model (in relation to an oppressed homosexuality), by de-stabilising all categories:

> [w]hy are these queer artists carrying the place of the inexpressible, the place of pain, in performances that have elicited an uncommon concern and unself-conscious new naiveté about representation? What is this purchase on/of the *Real* in queer performances about? […] queer performance is literally saturated by a desire to understand and pose the body as raw material, the body unmediated by the form and consumption of spectacle.[56]

This form of potentially postqueer performance is quite 'readable' in the works of such performance artists as Karen Finley or Ron Athey. Finley herself is a 'self-identified heterosexual', and yet the motivation of her work is undoubtedly queer – a fact exemplified by the furore of protest surrounding her work in America. Finley's work has been placed at the core of 1990s obscenity debates where, along with three other self-identified lesbian/gay/queer artists (Holly Hughes, Tim Miller and John Fleck), it has been subjected to a moral backlash and attempts at censorship.

Even though the main cause for concern with the three queer artists was unsurprisingly their explicit homoeroticism, it was Finley's presence as the only straight artist that caused most of the uproar since the homoerotic content of her

[56] Lynda Hart, 'Blood, Piss, and Tears: The Queer Real', *Textual Practice*, 9 (1995), 66.

work and frames of reference were so dynamically queer. The uncompromising impact of her work directly challenged her public status as a heterosexual woman, since all performative signifiers in the text should 'naturally' denote a lesbian identity.

Finley's work, therefore, empowered the queer agenda to the extreme, since she was, in effect, working from within the heteronormative matrix. The subordinate role of the gay-identified queer artist in relation to the homo/hetero binary fails to truly destabilize the heteronormative structures, yet when a straight-identified artist proposes such queer possibility its legitimacy as a definitive, fixed sexual category is directly placed in jeopardy, as Lynda Hart reiterates: 'for the "object" under attack by the homophobe is the presumed stability of his/her *own* identity.'[57] Finley's re-appropriation of the (female) body, in particular the anus (commonly associated with male homosexuality), not only attempts to transcend the boundaries of gender but also problematizes the hetero/homo binary:

> her performances enlist the possibilities for multiple, shifting identifications that psychoanalytic discourse permits without abandoning a materialist critique. In the gaps between her rhetoric and performance, she negotiates the psychic/social split that troubles the feminist project of enlisting psychoanalytic concepts in a materialist critique.[58]

Finley's work thus debates the boundaries of conventional discourse, appropriating and revealing queer techniques that articulate the constructedness of gender and sexual paradigms. But more importantly, she proposes the fact that

[57] Ibid. p. 64.
[58] Ibid. p. 64.

'heterosexuality is the site where resistance is most necessary.'[59] By asserting that homophobia is a reaction to, or fear of, revealing the fallacy of hetero/homo and masculine/feminine binaries (rather than merely a matter of sexual difference), the 'essential' nature of heterosexuality itself is put into question.

Problematically however, like most postmodern forms of performance, queer performance is ephemeral and merely visible 'in the moment.' As an artistic event, it is experiential and transient within the space of the performance, unlike the more documentative and constructed political texts of gay agit-prop drama (post-Stonewall and AIDS). It is hence through the practice of performance and its relation to performativity, that the question of queer as a theory can be addressed and explored, since it is the ideal public context for experimentation and exploration. Performance, in its direct and confrontative form, is the appropriate means by which to explore that which in reality may be impossible to implement (though the political implications of its corporealization within the space and in the presence of a collective audience is provocative enough). Queer/ness and performance work together due to their 'ontological affinities', ie. their obsession with the polysemic nature of being and the potency of re-imagining alternative realities and configurations.

The plurality of texts that will be explored within this study are selected with the intent of calling into question the variable aspects of performativity and performance that function as interpretive paradigms and political interventions. The actual definition of queer (albeit a contradiction in terms) is in a repeated state of continual flux and resignification. Any 'definition', therefore, lies within its versatility and mobility, and its relentless interrogation of representational disciplines and practices (which many critics perceive as the necessity for returning such

[59] Ibid. p. 64.

questions back to queer theory itself). The problematic debates between sexuality and performance may not be new to contemporary theatrical discourses and practices, but there is undoubtedly a distinct humanistic desire or drive for 'answers' that reveal some form of reducible 'truth', as exemplified by the rapid expansion of critical publications devoted to queer work:

> central to performance scholarship is a queer impulse that intends to discuss an object whose ontology, in its inability to *count* as a proper *proof,* is profoundly queer. The notion of (a) queer act […] is immediately linked to a belief in the performative as an intellectual and discursive worldmaking project. I want to propose queerness as a possibility, a sense of self-knowing, a mode of sociality and relationality […]. Queer acts, like queer performances and various performances of queerness, stand as evidence of queer lives, powers and possibilities.[60]

Queer Performance, therefore, seeks to evoke alternative modes of textuality and narrativity that almost subliminally remain after the act of performance itself: the residue or 'evidence' of what has transpired, a 'structure of feeling' (re. Raymond Williams). Queerness can be understood to engender a sense of ontological 'experience' that is almost material without actually being in any real way 'solid'; opaque as opposed to transparent. Its methodology lies, as Jose Esteban Muñoz argues, in a 'strategy of decipherment rather than interpretation, and the open play of meanings, significations and transgressions' that a text produces in performance: 'it is in the spirit of *doing* queerness, and perhaps, *making* queer worlds, that these queer acts of thinking, scholarship, writing, and performance are offered.'[61]

[60] Jose Esteban Muñoz, 'Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts', *Women & Performance,* 8 (1996), 5.
[61] Ibid. p. 5.

Outline

The central aim of this thesis is to engage with the complex critical frameworks surrounding queer formations of gender and sexuality, and to assess the importance of their conflicting and multiple constructions and representations in American drama, theatre and performance of the second half of the twentieth century.

To identify the historical, social and cultural constraints that shaped the manifestations of gay male identities on the American stage from the 1950s to the 1990s, I will offer extended analysis and close reading of selected texts, which will be analysed as case studies of particular constructions and representations. I will examine Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), *Suddenly, Last Summer* (1958), Mart Crowley's *The Boys in the Band* (1968), Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* (1985), Tony Kushner's two *Angels in America* (1992) plays, *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika*, Terrence McNally's *Love! Valour! Compassion!* (1994), and David Drake's *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me* (1994).

The format adopted by this thesis is chronological rather than thematic. Each chapter deals with specific texts and specific decades. Indeed, each separate chapter takes a chronological approach to its theme, incorporating some significant historical contextual detail, and closes by assessing the manifestations of queer identities. Each chapter relies on primary texts that I take to be representative of the form, and relies also on secondary texts that are used to provide the grounding and background for the arguments in the chapter.

The texts examined here were selected on the basis of their representativeness and I have generally tried, where possible, to cover 'less' oblique avant-garde texts,

most of all because hegemonic texts strike me as unshakeably important in cultural politics. Whatever one may seek to achieve in cultural and literary studies in terms of encouraging a cataloguing of subcultures, and the renegotiation of canons and so on, it seems to me that popular, hegemonic texts wield a remarkable cultural and political power. I certainly seek to include less well-known texts which I feel are particularly interesting – and which contribute to this thesis in a way otherwise unavailable in mainstream texts.

Regarding the outline of the thesis, in Chapter I, dedicated to Tennessee Williams's drama, I examine how the gay male is represented in the plays *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *Suddenly, Last Summer*, and how Williams employs queer strategies to construct the masculinity of his characters, not only male, but also female. Although queer theatre and performance are commonly regarded as the 'products' of an essentially nineties/new millennial discourse of postmodern revisionism, Williams's drama queerly subverts and implodes heteronormative ideology. Intrinsic and elusive traces of a 'queer philosophy' (albeit unknowingly) can be located as a foundational context and motivating factor in much of Williams's early work. In fact, Williams's early plays enable an approach to theatre and performance that preceded, anticipated and made a remarkable contribution to the later 'legitimate' forms of queer theatre that emerged.

In Chapter II, I focus on the 1960s and on the America of the beginning of the Civil Rights movement. In this chapter, I analyse the rupture with past representations of gay male identities by what is considered to be the first openly gay play, *The Boys in the Band* by Mart Crowley. *The Boys in the Band* constitutes a much criticized portrayal of the white, middle class gay man from New York in the pre-Stonewall period. In spite of the fact that Crowley's play does not represent the

gay subject as someone who lives his sexuality in a non-pathological (in personal terms), or an affirmative (in political terms) way, his play reveals this gay individual, in contrast to Williams's texts, as part of a group. Furthermore, Crowley's text rather than conform to the dictates of heteronormative narrative closure, provides a much more defiantly queer resolution. Despite the fact that the play is problematic due to its influential stereotyping of gay male homosexuality and its repetition of the 'tragic problem' of homosexuality, the play's refusal of conventional narrative resolution also allows it a 'queer potency' that is commonly underestimated.[62]

In Chapter III, I focus on the gay movements after Stonewall and on the evolution of 'identity politics' into 'queer politics.'[63] I also explore the conditions that gave birth to the formation of drama openly gay and how this accompanied, or fought against, the political and social ideals defended by the community in which this drama was inscribed. In this last chapter of the second part, I analyse the play *The Normal Heart* by Larry Kramer, exploring the role of theatre and performance in the context of the AIDS epidemic, and, particularly, the way in which in the 1980s,

[62] This chapter is considerably shorter than the previous and following chapters, but it is central for the trajectory of queer theatre and performance that this thesis offers and to the examination of pre- and post-Stonewall theatrical productions.

[63] There has been much criticism of identity politics that are based on foundational notions of essentialized identities, such as 'class', 'gender', 'race', 'culture' or 'nation.' They are seen as inherently contradictory, as the notion of a unified identity around which they organize themselves is usually constructed through the exclusion or suppression of difference. Rather than seek emancipation from them, they thus reproduce the very structures of power that marginalized them in the first place on the grounds of their difference. This is by now a well-rehearsed argument, particularly within recent feminism, which has put forward a critique of an essentialized notion of 'woman' as being exclusive of the differences of race, class or sexual orientation. This critique has been taken one step further by Judith Butler, who examines the category of gender and its discursive construction as divided from an essentialized concept of 'sex' as rooted in bodies: 'gender, naively (rather than critically) confused with sex, serves as a unifying principle of the embodied self and maintains that unity over and against an 'opposite sex' whose structure is presumed to maintain a parallel but oppositional internal coherence among sex, gender, and desire. [...]Hence, one is one's gender to the extent that one is not the other gender, a formulation that presupposes and enforces the restriction of gender within that binary pair' (Butler, p. 22). As for queer politics, it represents a fundamental rethinking of the theories of lesbian and gay emancipation, by positively celebrating sexual difference, challenging the heterocentric view that exclusive heterosexuality is somehow 'natural', and that lesbian and gay sexuality is inevitably destined to remain a minority sexual orientation, and most importantly, it is against assimilation. For more, see, for example, Michael Warner, *Fear of a Queer Planet,* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), and Mark Blasius, *Gay and Lesbian Politics: Sexuality and the Emergence of a New Ethic*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).

the gay male saw himself being represented as a 'victim' in both mainstream cultural productions and in gay productions. I also analyse *Angels in America* by Tony Kushner. This play reveals a different approach in comparison to the previously analysed plays, in the sense that in this text queerly subverts that image of 'victimization', precisely by returning to a renewed construction of masculinity – a consequence of the evolution of the queer politics in the 1990s. Another play examined in this chapter is *Love! Valour! Compassion!* by Terrence McNally, which reveals a resurgence of camp as a survival strategy. The examination of these texts demonstrates that these plays though effective in projecting a visible identity and consolidating a context or active forum for political expression and debate, end up being also reductive from a constructionist point of view in light of their adherence to essentialist binarisms that merely re-enforce conventional power relations and hierarchies.

With autobiography shedding light on problematics related to memory as a determining factor of certain specificities of a gay performance, Chapter IV concludes this study by focusing exclusively on the performance *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me* by David Drake. *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me*, a text and a performance militantly and openly gay, constitutes therefore the basis for a specific look at the place that gay culture occupied in America at the end of the twentieth century and its relation to mainstream culture. Drake's performance provides the mechanisms and principles to explore the construction of masculinity in the gay male at the end of the century.

To conclude, *I used to be subversive, but now I am gay* is partially American drama's coming out story, but most importantly, a queer intervention in the current culture wars; a queer political intervention for the original leaders of gay liberation,

the drag queens, the transsexuals, the leathermen, the bears, among many others, who are now being marginalized within the community, not to ruin the ‘gay cause’, when in the past, as we will see in the following chapters and analysed texts, they were a symbol of identity and subversion when represented on stage as well as in the streets. What is actually needed is an embracing of the ‘formlessness’, in which categories, definitions and hierarchies of desire are crushed and that many subjectivities and many desires can exist and live together.

CHAPTER I

Queer Challenges:

Queer Strategies in Tennessee Williams's

A Streetcar Named Desire, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof

and *Suddenly, Last Summer*

> America was on the move. This was the age of the car and the refrigerator as the stairway to the stars turned out to lead through suburbia.
>
> - C. W. E. Bigsby, *Modern American Drama, 1945-2000*, 1992

Tennessee Williams and Homosexual Defiance

It is a common cultural misconception to assume that the mainstream is an inherently and monolithically heterosexist paradigm, as Alexander Doty discusses in his queer re-reading of classical cinema.[1] Rather than reading queerness into mainstream texts or 'mak[e] things [perfectly] queer', he views the mainstream as a far more slippery and fluid concept that has persistently had heterosexist readings imposed upon it. Doty views all spectators (irrespective of sexuality) as having intense 'cultural and erotic investments in so-called mainstream and classic popular culture texts', and argues that such texts 'can be more queer-suggestive than "openly" gay, lesbian or bisexual.'[2] The concept of queer is hence regarded as primarily a descriptor of 'those aspects of spectatorship, cultural readership,

[1] Alexander Doty, *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

[2] Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture*, (London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 1.

production and textual coding that seem to establish spaces not described by, or contained within, straight, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, or transgendered understandings and categorizations of gender and sexuality.'[3] His work attempts to explore the 'complex circumstances in texts, spectators, and production that resist easy categorization, but that definitely escape or defy the heteronormative', and as such, queer readings in both cinema or theatre are just as legitimate as the preferred readings sanctioned by dominant culture.[4]

The representation of homosexuality in American theatre was outlawed until the end of the 1950s for fear that it would lead to 'the corruption of youth or others', or that such productions would attract homosexuals to the audience 'thus creating a visible presence and, therefore, a threat to the enforcement of invisibility.'[5] As a result, 'closet dramas' of this period saw sexual deviance as a tempting lure of the forbidden, wherein homosexuality was fluidly invoked and yet simultaneously disavowed actual articulation. Homosexual characters and relationships were commonly inferred through stereotype and an encoded structure of signs through which homosexuality could be deciphered. As John M. Clum proposes, a performative homosexuality was embodied through a 'catalogue' or 'combination of selections':

> Effeminacy (mincing, limp wrists, lisping, flamboyant dress)
>
> Sensitivity (moodiness, a devotion to his mother, a tendency to show emotion in an unmanly way)
>
> Artistic talent or sensibility
>
> Misogyny

[3] Ibid. pp. 6-7.
[4] Ibid. p. 7.
[5] Cited in John M. Clum, *Still Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama*, (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2000), p. 74, from the Wales Padlock Act of the New York Penal Code that outlawed plays 'depicting or dealing with the subject of sex degeneracy, or sex perversion.'

> Pederasty (as we shall see, this became the stereotypical formula for homosexual relationships, with its connotations of arrested development and pernicious influence)
> Foppishness
> Isolation (the homosexual's fate, if he or she remained alive at the final curtain)[6]

The aim of such 'combination' was, of course, to attempt to universalize a system by which the invisible 'danger' of homosexuality could be exposed. Heterosexist culture could thereby seem to be given privileged and empowered access to the identification and marginalization of its deviant other, but ironically the establishment of such a system also provided a means by which the homosexual could 'pass' in heteronormative society by refusing to enact such a performative system: '[t]he homosexual character is often trapped in a ritual of purgation - of identifying and eliminating. Visual stereotypes allow the playwright and performers to enact this ritual without ever naming what is considered unspeakable.'[7] Examples of this 'ambiguity' are some of Tennessee Williams's most successful plays, namely *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), and *Suddenly, Last Summer* (1958)

Tennessee Williams (1911-1983), one of the most important and influential American playwrights of the twentieth-century, was responsible, together with his contemporary Arthur Miller, for the creation of an American drama independent of the European models.[8] Both Williams and Miller were part of those marginalized

[6] Ibid. p. 77.
[7] Ibid. p. 78.
[8] Conflicted over his own sexuality, Tennessee Williams wrote directly about homosexuality in his short stories and poetry, but only rarely, and more subliminally, in his plays. Williams's life is almost as well known as his work. Born Thomas Lanier Williams on 26 March 1911 in Columbus, Mississippi, son of a prim minister's daughter and a tough shoe salesman who called his son 'Miss

groups of the domestic revival: Williams was homosexual and Miller was associated with the American communist party. Producing their most important works during the mid-forties and the beginning of the 1960s, their theatre apparently corresponds to the models of the ruling ideology. However, the subversion is held inside, or from these models.

Surveillance, arrest, police harassment, gay men imprisoned in violent wards, a government-sanctioned, organized drive to single out homosexuals in the workplace: this was the atmosphere in which Williams wrote the plays examined in this thesis. To destabilize this atmosphere, good news struck most homosexuals on 3 January 1948 with the publication of *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male*, based on 10,000 face-to-face interviews with American men and women. The Kinsey Report, as it quickly became know, challenged nearly every widespread assumption about sexuality, and became an instant best-seller. Among Kinsey's principal findings was that there was nothing the least 'abnormal' about homosexuality and homosexual experiences were far more common than had been thought. Furthermore, as the historian John D'Emilio argues: 'Kinsey's work gave an added push at a crucial time

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Nancy', Williams spent his formative years in St. Louis, Missouri. Williams's deepest attachment was to his sister, Rose, institutionalized in the 1930s and lobotomized after accusing her father of sexual abuse. A published writer of fiction and poetry since he was a teenager, Williams studied writing at the University of Iowa and, after some initial failures, became the best known playwright of the 1940s and 1950s. The last twenty years of his life were spent trying to recapture the success of his early plays, but substance abuse and a loss of self and artistic control are evident in his later work. He died from choking on the cap of a medicine container on 25 February 1983. Williams's gayness was an open secret he neither publicly confirmed nor denied until the post-Stonewall era when gay critics took him to task for not coming out, which he did in a series of public utterances, his *Memoirs* (1975), self-portraits in some of the later plays, and the novel, *Moise and the World of Reason* (1975), all of which document Williams's sense of himself as a gay man. However, anyone who had read his stories and poems, in which Williams could be more candid than he could be in works written for a Broadway audience, had ample evidence of his homosexuality. A starting point for gay readers of Williams is not the plays but the short stories, particularly the two set in the decaying Joy Rio movie theatre, 'Hard Candy' and 'The Mysteries of the Joy Rio.' In these stories, one sees some of Williams's basic connections as sex and its simultaneous confrontation with beauty and death. The stories open a theatrical space for the acting out of homosexual desire that is also disease and death. For an insightful examination of Williams's life and work see, for example, Michael Paller, *Gentlemen Callers: Tennessee Williams, Homosexuality, and Mid-Twentieth-Century Drama*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

to the emergence of an urban gay subculture.'[9] However, what the Kinsey Report delivered, the 'Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in Government' took away and the surveillance of homosexuals became institutionalized: '[t]he social engineers of mobilizations and military life repeatedly insisted that there was a useful homosexual-heterosexual dichotomy and that, moreover, every man should know which group he belonged to, accepting the benefits of the choice or taking the consequences of the other.'[10] This heteronormative discourse remained institutionalized for more than two decades.[11]

In this context, Williams's theatre depicts a weak and unadjusted masculinity, where the homoerotic menace appears close to being materialized. The gay character is usually constructed as physically absent, being only materialized through the characters' memories. Alternatively, the female characters are strong and dominating, constructed with an authoritative sense of presence. Williams gives voice to the marginalized minority that did not fit in the ideological structure of the Cold War period and his work is revealing of the anguish of men and women who would not find, in this structure, any kind of personal identification.[12]

In the plays examined in this thesis, Williams employs a double performance: on the one hand, the heterosexual performance is highly visible; on the other hand, the homosexual performance, the most rich of the two in terms of possible readings and interpretations, occupies a place in the subtext – hidden behind the doors of the

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[9] John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States 1940-1970*, (London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 37.

[10] John Loughery, *The Other Side of Silence: Men's Lives and Gay Identities. A Twentieth-Century History*, (New York: Henry Holt, 1998), p. 159.

[11] For a detailed historical account on homosexuality in the 1950s see, for example, John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States 1940-1970*, (London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

[12] David Savran, *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers: The Politics of Masculinity in the Work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams*, (London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), p. 6.

white straight America of the 1950s. However, in spite of the fact that the gay character is almost always physically absent, an economy of homoerotic desire is present throughout these texts. Williams manages to ally his homosexual economy of desire to a heterosexual one imposed by heteronormativity. Simultaneously, the playwright also exposes the violence that is part of the exercise of an authoritarian masculinity and enhances women's power and sexual desire.[13]

Even though homosexuality in these plays remains 'unsaid', the visibly marked 'persona' and 'sensibility' that characterized cultural understandings and stereotypes of the homosexual are glaringly abundant. Thus, in these particular texts, homosexuality is conveyed through 'the eyes of the beholder' and, therefore, open to audience interpretation.[14] Despite the fact that these plays are problematic due to their influential stereotyping of homosexuality, their dual textuality and refusal of conventional narrative resolution also allows them a queer potency that is commonly underestimated.

The chameleon-like identity of the homosexual in Williams's work during the 1950s and the 'danger' of being subversively encoded can be regarded as having much more in common with a radical queer theatre than the more fixed attempt at assimilation in such mainstream works of later gay theatre: a theatre based more upon the affirmation of an essential identity that is safely distanced from the normative (examined more fully in subsequent chapters).

[13] Ibid. p. 81.
[14] Clum, p. 84.

Visibility and Masculine Performativity in *A Streetcar Named Desire*

Blanche Dubois is part of the pantheon of women (fictional or real) who were appropriated as icons of gay culture.[15] It is not by accident that Pedro Almodóvar recovers this play of 1947 in his film *Todo Sobre mi Madre* (1999), placing the character played by Marisa Paredes representing Blanche on the stages of Madrid and Barcelona. Almodóvar's cinema also produces women who became gay icons – not only the characters, but the actresses themselves, like Rossy de Palma, Vitoria Abril or Marisa Paredes. The freedom, but also the condemnation, that signifies the affirmation of a sexual desire in Blanche, resulted in her cultural appropriation by several productions, not only gay, but also mainstream. In one of the episodes of the animated series *The Simpsons*, Marge, the mother of the typical dysfunctional American family is invited to play Blanche Dubois – the dream of her life, she confesses – in a local production of Williams's play. And Marge, totally inhabiting the character, carries that spirit of liberation and revolt to her suburban house in Springfield. Blanche Dubois' appropriation by gay culture is also reflected in the famous sentence 'Whoever you are – I have always depended on the kindness of strangers'[16] that Blanche directs to the doctor in the end of the play, and which became forever associated to a gay cruising culture that refuses (or it is not capable of) a stable relation.[17]

[15] For more on Blanche Dubois as an important and iconic figure in gay culture see, for example Philip C. Kolin, 'Reflections on/of *A Streetcar Named Desire*', in *Confronting Tennessee Williams's 'A Streetcar Named Desire': Essays in Critical Pluralism*, ed. by Philip C. Kolin (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1993), pp. 1-17. and Ann Wilson, 'The Politics of Sexual Anxiety in *Sweeth Bird of Youth*', in *Tennessee Williams: A Casebook*, ed. by Robert F. Gross (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 79-90.

[16] Tennessee Williams, 'A Streetcar Named Desire', in *A Streetcar Named Desire and Other Plays*, (London: Penguin, 2000 [1947]), pp. 113-226 (p. 225). Subsequent references to Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* will be placed within parentheses in the text and will be to this edition, unless stated otherwise.

[17] Alan Sinfield, *Out on Stage: Lesbian and Gay Theatre in the Twentieth Century*, (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 188.

A Streetcar Named Desire had its Broadway opening on 3 December 1947 at the Barrymore Theatre. It was directed by Elia Kazan, with Stanley played by Marlon Brando, Jessica Tandy as Blanche, and Kim Hunter as Stella.[18] John Clum describes the rupture that the hyper-masculine character Stanley meant in the history of American theatre:

> [i]n 1947, Tennessee Williams wrought a revolution in American Drama by making a male character, Stanley Kowalski as played by Marlon Brando, the object of gaze and of desire. A man was placed in the spectacular position heretofore held by women. A man was looked at, admired, lusted after.[19]

Streetcar not only placed men as 'object of gaze and of desire', but also represented women as sexually active.[20] Furthermore, by embodying desire in Blanche and Stella, Williams represents a heteronormative system that represses and condemns this kind of sexual desire, but does not, however, condemn physical violence against women.

In Scene Ten of *Streetcar*, Stanley rapes Blanche, whilst his wife is in the hospital giving birth to their first child. Stella's reaction when returning home and hearing about the rape through Blanche is to institutionalize her into a psychiatric facility. Stella wishes to erase these memories from Blanche's mind, and, thus, protect her family. Stella, in a conversation with her neighbour Eunice, who, like Stella, lives with a violent partner, justifies her decision:

> STELLA: I don't know if I did the right thing.

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[18] In 1951, after directing the play on Broadway, Kazan directed the film version of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, with Marlon Brando and Vivien Leigh, playing Stanley and Blanche.

[19] John M. Clum, *Something for the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture*, (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1999), p. 25.

[20] Sinfield, p. 189.

> EUNICE: What else could you do?
>
> STELLA: I couldn't believe her story and go on living with Stanley.
>
> EUNICE: Don't ever believe it. Life has to go on. No matter what happens, you've got to keep on going. (217).

Within the heterormative system represented in the play, both Stella and Eunice depend economically on their husbands, and possibly for this reason, privilege a relation of submission in relation to their partners to any other familiar or affective bonds. Conversely, Stanley places homosocial relations above marriage. Heteronormativity is embodied in all male characters of the play, and in particular in Stanley's heteronormative model of masculinity. Stanley is constructed as the real American 'macho':

> Animal joy in his being is implicit in all his movements and attitudes. Since earliest manhood the center of his life has been pleasure with women, the giving and taking of it, not with weak indulgence, dependently, but with the power and the pride of a richly feathered bird among hens. (128).

Blanche also describes Stanley within a primitive model of masculinity: 'Thousands and thousands of years have passed him right by, and there he is – Stanley Kowalski – survivor of the Stone Age! Bearing the raw meat home from the kill in the jungle!' (163). Stanley also defines himself as a prime example of the postwar ideological model of the American man, even rejecting his Polish origins: 'what I am is a one hundred per cent American, born and raised in the greatest country on earth and proud as hell of it, so don't ever call me a Polack' (197).

In a context in which the woman is usually the object of the erotic gaze, Stanley competes with Blanche for this position, and this is where the

heteronormative system begins to be subverted in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. In a clear mutual sexual provocation, Stanley and Blanche confront each other, repeatedly throughout the play, with the minimal amount of clothing. On first encountering each other, Stanley takes his shirt off: 'My clothes're stickin' to me. Do you mind if I make myself comfortable?' (129). Blanche is unnerved by, but cannot help gazing at, Stanley's torso.

Laura Maulvey argues that audiences identify with the male protagonist:

> [a]s the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look onto that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence.[21]

Mulvey focuses on the general placing of male subjectivities at the centre of Hollywood cinema and on the male's gaze on the female body. On the other hand, Kaja Silverman focuses on the lack of representation of the female voice:

> [t]o allow her to be heard without being seen would […] disrupt the spectacular regime upon which mainstream cinema relies; it would put her beyond control of the male gaze, and release her voice from the signifying obligations which that gaze sustains.[22]

Both authors ignore, however, the possibility of the gay male gaze in their arguments and are only centred on the heterosexual paradigms male/female and

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[21] Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988 [1975]), p. 426.

[22] Kaja Silverman, 'Dis-Embodying the Female Voice', in *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. by Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams (Los Angeles: American Film Institute, 1984), pp. 131-49 (p. 135).

active/passive. Thus, both Mulvey and Silverman present heterosexual-oriented arguments, ignoring gay or lesbian subjectivities that might change conventional views of the gaze. Nevertheless, considering Maulvey's and Silverman's theories on filmic representations, which consider that heterosexual-oriented cinema places the male subject at his centre, it is possible to argue that in *Streetcar* Williams places himself and his own gaze at the centre by clearly perceiving Stanley as 'sexy' and presenting him as such. This gay male gaze redirects the heterosexual male/female dichotomy to the male body, distorting the distinction heterosexual/homosexual, man/woman and active/passive. Williams constructs Stanley's hyper-masculinity against the implicit homoerotism of homosocial bonds and frames him within the heteronormative system, but, however, by constructing him as 'a richly feathered bird among hens' (128), Williams places Stanley as object of gaze and desire, both straight and gay. This erotization of Stanley's male body, if only paratextually, has a subversively queer force that undermines the play's heteronormative model.

Mitch, however, is totally different from Stanley, even in the way he describes how sweaty he is: 'I am ashamed of the way I perspire. My shirt is sticking to me.' (178). Mitch is not 'sexy.' However, as Blanche states, there is a quality that opposes him with the other men in the play: '[…] a sort of sensitive look.' (146). Blanche knows through her sister, Stella, that Mitch is single, that he takes care of his sick mother and that he has a precarious job at the same place where Stanley works. According to Stella, Stanley is the only man in the group with a better job, which also positions him above the other men. Mitch and Blanche have a relationship in the play, but their relationship is of pure self-interest: Mitch wants to get married and Blanche is a poor and ageing Southern belle looking for economic support and affection.

Mitch is tolerant at first of Blanche's idiosyncrasies: he agrees to see her only in poor lighting; he respects her, satisfying himself with small displays of affection and kindly hoping for more. But when Stanley tells him about her past, he rejects her, and the last shred of hope Blanche might have clung to thus disappears, as Mitch is 'Stanleyized' (207). Furthermore, at the end of the play, when Blanche is being taken to a psychiatric institution, Mitch only says to Stanley: 'You! You done this, all o' your God damn interfering with things you –' (224), being quickly restrained by Pablo and Steve. Mitch, as well as Eunice, Steve, Pablo, and Stella became Stanley's accomplices, upholders of the patriarchy that has imposed violence and silence on minorities for millennia, all reinforcing the visible heteronormative structure of the play.

Yet, Blanche's dead husband is present throughout the play to destabilize this same structure. Allan only appears through Blanche's memories and although he may be a dead homosexual, Williams insists on his continuing influence through the 'Varsouviana', which Judith J. Tompson calls 'an aural symbol of her guilt', and through the sound of the gunshot and of the locomotive.[23] Although the homosexual character does not appear in the play, he exerts a tremendous influence on its development as well as on various levels of its interpretation. In many ways Allan's death is the cause of Blanche's destruction, and it is one of the most crucial elements of the play as well as of Blanche's personal, cultural and social background.

In this context, viewed from various perspectives, the theme of homosexuality in *Streetcar* is more crucial to that play than most critics recognize. Although the references to it are fleeting, it has a subterranean presence throughout. It demonstrates Williams's consummate skill in describing the homosexual figure in

[23] Judith J. Thompson, *Tennessee Williams' Plays: Memory, Myth, and Symbol*, (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), p. 34.

elaborate, refined, and sympathetic terms, in presenting homosexuality in a subtle, elusive, and profound manner. At the same time, in this play, Williams demonstrates the estrangement of the homosexual and the extent of the social pressure operating against him, as Allan, unable to endure the pressure of the sudden public revelation of his homosexuality, killed himself with a gunshot to the head.

Streetcar's queerest passage is Blanche's description of Allan Grey, placed 'at almost the exact center of *Streetcar*'s eleven scene structure, as if all dramatic action prior to it radiates backward and all after it projects forward, further emphasizing its often neglected importance':[24]

> He was a boy, just a boy, when I was a very young girl. When I was sixteen, I made the discovery – love. All at once and much, much too completely. It was like you suddenly turned a blinding light on something that had always been half in shadow, that's how it struck the world for me. But I was unlucky. Deluded. There was something different about the boy, a nervousness, a softness and tenderness which wasn't like a man's, although he wasn't the least bit effeminate looking – still – that thing was there… He came to me for help. I didn't know that. I didn't find out anything till after our marriage when we'd run away and come back and all I knew was I'd failed him in some mysterious way and wasn't able to give the help he needed but couldn't speak of! He was in the quicksands and clutching at me – but I wasn't holding him out, I was slipping in with him! I didn't know that. I didn't know anything except I loved him unendurably but without being able to help him or help myself. (182-183).

Like Stanley, Blanche describes Allan in terms of his masculinity: he was not 'effeminate looking', referring to the reassuring cliché for the dominant culture of the

[24] William Mark Poteet, *Gay Men in Modern Southern Literature: Ritual, Initiation, and the Construction of Masculinity*, (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), p. 30.

time that all gay man were feminine, but, on the other hand, she says that 'there was something different about the boy, a nervousness, a softness and tenderness which wasn't like a man's.' In this part of Blanche's description she partakes in the general enforcement of gender roles in the heteronormative system of the play, which constrain men to repress their feelings and hide their fragility. Further into Blanche's description she says that Allan came to her for help, which could have happened if Allan saw himself as 'ill' and sought a 'cure' in Blanche, but was too terrified to confide in her.

Blanche then describes how she found out about Allan's homosexuality: 'In the worst of all possible ways. By coming suddenly into a room that I thought was empty – which wasn't empty, but had two people in it…' (183). Allan was caught in the act and as a result Blanche told him: '"I know! I know! You disgust me…"' (183). A western heteronormative society expresses its homophobia in various ways, but one of the most common learned notions is that of disgust. The homosexual as cultural 'other' is he who does things with his body homophobic society refuses to envisage and is shocked when compelled to visualize. Hence, Blanche finding out 'in the worst of all possible ways.' As Antony Easthope puts it:

> [t]he dominant myth of masculinity demands that homosexual desire, if it cannot be sublimated, must be expelled. And this governs the prevailing attitude towards male homosexuals. It accounts for homophobia, the fear of homosexuality, and for the way that gay individuals are made into scapegoats […]. Homophobia strives manfully to eliminate its opposite, the thing which causes it. It does this mainly through three operations which are understood by psychoanalysis as projection, hysteria and paranoia.[25]

[25] Antony Easthope, *What a Man's Gotta Do: The Masculine Myth in Popular Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 105.

Many critics argue that Blanche remains homophobic after the death of her husband, but I believe she in fact evolves considerably in this respect. Her initial homophobia is diminished by her feelings of guilt and her subsequent identification with Allan, as they are both victims of heteronormativity.[26]

Blanche's and Allan's guilt, and the guilt and homophobia of many other characters in Williams's theatre, led to the characterization of Williams as a self-hating homosexual, namely by Gore Vidal and John M. Clum.[27] The guilt which Williams's characters feel may echo the guilt of the homosexual writer 'born in the Episcopal rectory' and raised 'in the shadow of the Episcopal church.'[28] Guilt may have been unavoidable for Williams in the repressive political atmosphere of the 1940s and 1950s which 'were extremely turbulent and trying decades for gay men and lesbians in America.'[29] However, sketching Williams as a self-hating homosexual would ignore the deeply homophobic culture of the 1940s and 1950s and its internalization in the author.[30]

After all, it is this homophobic culture and reigning heteronormativity that drove Allan to neurosis, and then to suicide. Through him, it drove Blanche to neurosis, and then to a psychiatric institution. Blanche's tragedy is above all the result of a severe hegemonic masculine dramatic structure, which at the same time allows for gay pleasure to be derived from the play. As William Mark Poteet argues 'psychic theatres, infused into the play, allow gay men, especially gay men of the day, a way to derive pleasure from the homosexual representation of Allan and his

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[26] See, for example, John M. Clum, ''Something Cloudy, Something Clear:' Homophobic Discourse in Tennessee Williams', in *Modern Critical Interpretations: Tennessee Williams's Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 2002), pp. 20-43.

[27] See Gore Vidal, 'Introduction', in *Tennessee Williams: Collected Stories*, (London: Vintage Classics, 1999), pp. xix-xxv., and John M. Clum, *Still Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama*, (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2000).

[28] Albert J. Devlin, 'Conversations with Tennessee Williams', (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), (p. 58).

[29] Savran, p. 84.

[30] Ibid. p. 84.

friend', in addition to the pleasure of gazing at Stanley, which ultimately leads to subliminally subvert the ruling hegemonic system.[31]

From Heteronormative Masculinity to Homosexuality in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*

A rich southern plantation, a place of memory for Blanche in a *Streetcar*, is, in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, actual setting. This property belongs to the patriarch of the family, Big Daddy, and it is located in the Mississippi Delta. This property appears from the beginning of the play to be haunted by a memory. It was in the same bedroom, now occupied by Brick and Maggie, that the two previous owners, Jack Straw and Peter Orchello, shared a relationship that Williams describes as 'a relationship that must have involved a tenderness which was uncommon.'[32] The space of this bedroom and the marriage of Brick and Maggie appear marked by the relationship of the two men for whom Big Daddy had worked when he was young, and from whom he inherited the property and lands. Straw and Ochello are the very foundations of the Pollitt dynasty, and the construction of a devoted gay couple who achieve economic success against the odds is from the start a clever, seamless weaving of anti-homophobic values into the text. Regarding the bed once occupied by Straw and Orchello, Christopher Bigsby writes: '[t]he bed which dominates the opening and closing scenes has been rendered ironic as its literal and symbolical functions have been denied by a man who fears the future it may engender.'[33] As central as the bed is the couple who once slept on it, and it is through the continuous references to Straw and Orchello present throughout the play that Williams starts to

[31] Poteet, p. 33.

[32] Tennessee Williams, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, (New York: Signet, n.d. [1955]), p. xiii. Subsequent references to Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* will be placed within parentheses in the text and will be to this edition, unless stated otherwise.

[33] C. W. E. Bigsby, *Modern American Drama 1945-1990*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000 [1992]), p. 58.

subvert the American myth of male companionship, not only by making homoeroticism explicit, but by categorizing it as domestic.

In this context, the figure of the patriarch works, to a certain extent, as vector of homoerotic desire, passed from Straw and Orchello to his son Brick. In a conversation between Big Daddy and Brick in the second act of the play, Big Daddy implies that he had sexual relations with men during his youth – 'I knocked around in my time' (85) – but these experiences are justified by a forced context of homosociability, where these practices could be accepted and not seen as pathological. However, Brick's case is different: his desire is materialized in the figure of a single man, Skipper, and gives the impression of going beyond the purely physical pleasure.

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof is divided into three acts and takes place in a single day. The play had its Broadway premiere at the Morosco Theatre on 24 March 1955, in a production directed by Elia Kazan, with Ben Gazarra as Brick and Barbara Bel Geddes as Maggie. The play ran for six hundred and ninety-four performances, winning the Pulitzer Prize, the Drama Critics' Circle and Donaldson Awards. The film version of *Cat* (1958) was directed by Richard Brooks and played by Paul Newman and Elizabeth Taylor. Written by Williams to be directed by Elia Kazan, it may have been the mutual confidence and complicity between them, expressed by the playwright himself, that lead the director to ask for some alterations on the third act. Firstly, the director felt that Big Daddy's character was too strong to disappear in the first act. Secondly, Kazan considered that Brick's character should undergo some change in his behaviour, as a result of the conversation with his father in the previous act. Lastly, Kazan felt that Maggie should be more appealing to the audience. A comparative analysis that I make further into this chapter of the two versions of the

third act of *Cat* will mainly focus on Brick, and what I consider to be an extinguishing of his sexual ambiguity in the 'Broadway Version', in contrast to the deepening and almost certification of his sexual dissidence in the third act of the original version. The indifference of Brick to the conversation with Big Daddy, keeping himself merged in his universe of silence (in his closet) during the third act, may have made Kazan fear censorship and thus the commercial viability of the performance.

Cat's text is dominated by extensive stage directions, a practice originated in the dramatic writing of the nineteenth-century and that continued with realist theatre, revealing the desire of playwrights to control the staging of their plays.[34] These stage directions not only provide a subtext from which the actors and director may work on the characters and the play, but also show the reader the relationship between the text (dialogue) and the action – a relationship not always self-evidently coherent. In the case of *Cat*, the reading of this relationship reveals itself as fundamental to understanding Brick, for whom verbalization is an act of great difficulty. David Savran explains:

> [i]n most realistic plays, these supplementary – that is, absolutely crucial – jottings play a key role in constituting the dramatic characters as coherent subjects for whom the gap between spoken and unspoken, or action and desire, can be analyzed according to (various) psychological principles and thereby successfully negotiated.[35]

The first act, centered mainly on Brick and Maggie, reveals the main elements of tension and anxiety that will mark the play. The couple does not have

[34] Savran, p. 103.
[35] Ibid. p. 103.

children, and hence are excluded from heteronormative familial structure, creating an atmosphere of suspicion around their relationship. Big Mama says to Maggie: 'Something's not right! You're childless and my son drinks!' (37). On the other hand, Gopper, Brick's brother, and his wife Mae, have five children and are waiting for the sixth. Maggie reveals that the constant presence of the in-laws at the house is not due to Big Daddy's state of health, but to the need to assure Big Daddy's inheritance for themselves; they intend to put Brick in a rehabilitation institution due to his alcoholism. Thus, Williams explores again the theme of the attempted erasure or removal of a character, because the character constitutes an obstacle to the other character's objectives, or to perpetuate a family model.

In the conversation between Maggie and Brick, which dominates the entire first act, it is revealed that their relationship still exists because Maggie accepted some kind of deal imposed by her husband. One understands that this deal involved not having sexual relations – Brick sleeps on a couch in the bedroom – maintaining only a facade of their relationship. However, this situation is destroying Maggie, who feels as if she is fulfilling a punishment, affirming her desire for her husband in continuous attempts at seduction: '*I feel all the time like a cat on a hot tin roof!*' (31), says Maggie to Brick, to which Brick replies that she should get a lover. Maggie does not seem to depend on Brick for economic reasons; she seems to be dependent on Brick's beauty. References to Brick's beauty and physical appeal are recurrent throughout the text, as Brick's body is to Maggie place of sexual realization, and Williams offers him as such: 'You've kept in good shape, though. […] I always thought drinkin' men lost their looks, but I was plainly mistaken.' (24). As examined in relation to *Streetcar*, once again Williams directs the gaze to the male protagonist. In *Cat*, the male body is clearly an object of erotic desire, like Stanley's in *Streetcar*.

When Maggie gazes on Brick's body, and by eroticizing Brick, Williams once again centers the play on gay male subjectivity.[36]

Brick seems to be Williams's version of the flawed American hero. His glory days as a promising high-school athlete and football player are long behind him, as symbolized by the crutch with which he clatters around the stage. His short career as a sports commentator is likewise over, ruined by his worsening alcoholism and the realization that he cannot bring himself to talk about something he is no longer fit or young enough to do.

The other ghost, or memory, that haunts these characters – besides Straw and Orchello – is Skipper, Brick's friend and colleague from the American football team, who died from a heart attack induced by alcohol. Skipper, however, haunts the text in a far less benign way than the ghosts of Straw and Ochello. If Brick is constructed as an object of desire, Maggie and Skipper are the desiring subjects. Maggie desires Brick and expects that he will feel for her what he once felt for Skipper. However, Brick is inaccessible, as he was to his friend. Maggie affirms that she slept with Skipper in the past, because it was the only way that they found of being a little bit closer to Brick, the common object of desire: 'Skipper and I made love, if love you could call it, because it made both of us feel a little bit closer to you.' (42-43). Then, she adds: 'You see, you son of a bitch, you asked too much of people, of me, of him, of all the unlucky damned sons of bitches that happen to love you…' (43).

Maggie's following speech is surprising, in that it considers Skipper's love for Brick to be a noble act, respecting it because it is a love that could never meet a satisfactory ending:

[36] Dean Shackelford, 'The Truth Must Be Told: Gay Subjectivity, Homophobia, and Social History in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*', *Tennessee Williams Annual Review,* 1 (1998), 108.

> It was one of those beautiful, ideal things they tell about in the Greek legends, it couldn't be anything else, you being you, and that's what make it so sad, that's what made it so awful, because it was love that never could be carried to anything satisfying or even talked about plainly. Brick, I tell you, you got to believe me, Brick I *do* understand all about it. I – I think it was – *noble*! (42).

Maggie's statement, and later Big Daddy's in the second act, elevates the homerotic bonds between Brick and Skipper to the platonic level. Despite the homosexuality taking a more central place in *Cat* than in *Streetcar*, the physical elements are less present, due to the lack of intimacy between Brick and Skipper. Moreover, at this point, the question of homosexual desire in *Cat* does not seem to appear ever as a pathological problem – the speeches of Maggie and Big Daddy are ones of acceptance. What Williams seems to intend to denounce is the self-oppression of the gay individual in relation to his homosexuality – an internalized homophobia – as well as the social contingencies imposed on this same sexuality, Brick being the embodiment of this self-oppression and fear of being considered homosexual.

Savran argues that *Cat* is constructed around an immobilized love triangle between the living and the dead, where Maggie is the moderator.[37] Maggie notes that she was always aware that, in some social circumstances, she and Skipper's girlfriend were only there to keep up appearances. Brick is revolted with these affirmations, because of the fact that Maggie is entering a territory he considers sacred – the territory of truth: 'Not love with you, Maggie, but friendship with Skipper was that one great true thing, and you are naming it dirty!' (44). But it is, equally, Brick's sexuality that Maggie questions with these affirmations, a

[37] Savran, p. 107.

masculinity that is here presented – consciously from Brick's part – as a construction inside this world of lies – a world, where at least apparently, gender constructions and sexualities must correspond to the established norm.

One of the changes that Kazan requested to Williams was regarding Maggie's character. The rewriting of the third act reveals a more seductive and dominating Maggie. However, in the first two acts and in the original version of the third act, Maggie is essentially a character marked by a constant anxiety in the search for acceptance and a (self-imposed) identification with a patriarchal system. In her article 'Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic', Sue-Ellen Case makes the following analogy between the heteronormative system and the American realistic theatre: '[t]he violence released in the continual zooming-in on the family unit, and the heterosexist ideology linked with its stage partner, is directed against women and their hint of seduction.'[38] Case continues this idea affirming that this kind of violence materializes itself in some of these cultural productions in the physical aggression towards women.[39] Maggie is a victim of physical aggression, and struggles to become part of the patriarchal system in both versions of the play, only changing significantly to a more seductive character in the rewritten third act. In the particular case of this play, one cannot talk about a heterosexist posture, in the terms of Case, as Williams offers equally a denunciation of the 'fake' masculinity of the subject who perpetuates the aggression, pointing to his weaknesses in terms of gender construction. In this analysis, this violence may be interpreted as a way of disguising homosexual desire through the expression of the most basic demonstration of virility, which is aggression.

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[38] Case, Sue-Ellen, 'Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic', in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, ed. by Cleto, Fabio (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), pp. 282-99 (p. 297).

[39] Ibid. p. 197. Case gives the example, among others, of Sam Shepard's play *A Lie in the Mind* (1985).

Maggie reminds Brick of the night that she and Skipper got drunk together in a bar while watching a game of the Dixie Stars. It was the night that Skipper attacked Maggie, after she told him: 'SKIPPER! STOP LOVIN' MY HUSBAND OR TELL HIM HE'S GOT TO LET YOU ADMIT IT TO HIM!' (45). When Brick hears these words from Maggie, it is he who now wants to attack Maggie with a crutch. Brick's aggressiveness may be the result of the realization of the game Maggie is playing, in the sense of destroying Skipper and his relationship with Brick. Maggie herself affirms that she contributed to Skipper's self-destruction by calling his attention to the truth – a truth that, according to Maggie, Brick would not allow to be verbalized. Following this episode, Maggie tells Brick that Skipper tried to seduce her: '- When I came to his room that night, with a little scratch like a shy little mouse at his door, he made that pitiful, ineffectual little attempt to prove what I said wasn't true…' (43). This was one of the moments that led to Skipper's death. Savran deconstructs this moment:

> [w]hen she attemps to force her way into the relationship (that decisively unsettles the distinction between homosocial and homossexual desire), making love to Skipper, it is because 'it made both of us feel a little bit closer to [Brick],' the common object of desire […]. Since her liaison with Skipper, Brick's repudiation of him, and Skipper's quasi-suicide, Maggie has become the inheritor, the mediator in a now-immobilized erotic triangle between the living and the dead, the woman who desires to be a partner in an impossible and belated erotic fascination, the woman who, in coveting Brick's aloofness, desires his very refusal to desire her.[40]

In accordance with Savran's argument, Maggie realizes that Skipper's death is the cause of Brick's apathy, and now she is the mediator in the relationship

[40] Savran, p. 107.

between Brick and Skipper. However, Maggie's position leads to Brick's contempt and the only way to reclaim his love is aknowledging a erotic relation between Brick and Skipper.

At this point in the play's action, Maggies states that she made love with Skipper as a way for both of them to feel closer to Brick. However, this is a contraditory statement as Brick's alienation only started following Skipper's death: 'we were happy, weren't we, we were blissful, yes, hit heaven together ev'ry time that we loved!' (43). Thus, Maggie's sexual encounter with Skipper may have been only a selfless act to let Skipper feel closer to Brick, or Maggie simply wanted to be sure if Skipper was gay or not. In this context, Maggie's body becomes the instrument of revelation of Skipper's homosexuality. On this dynamic, Judith Butler argues: '[t]he body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others but also to touch and violence. The body can be the agency and instrument of all these as well, or the site where "doing" and "being done to" become equivocal.'[41] In this perspective, Maggie's body represents 'doing', but also 'being done to', because it was with the objective of confirming Skipper's homosexuality that Maggie made love to him.

Consequently, Maggie's body presents itself as the only element of physical exchange between Brick and Skipper: 'Maggie's body is the one point of sexual contact that Brick and Skipper have shared. By sleeping with Maggie, Brick may be vicariously establishing sexual bond with his dead friend.'[42]

The second act of the play starts by centering on Big Daddy's drama. The action of the play takes place on his birthday, the same day his family is going to tell him that he has cancer. Big Daddy is constructed as a figure of masculine power,

[41] Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 21.

[42] Mark Royden Winchell, '"Come Back to the Locker Room Ag'n, Brick Honey!"', *Mississippi Quarterly*, 48 (1995), 704.

similar to the image of the American pioneer. Maggie admires him and identifies herself with him for that reason – 'he's still a Mississippi red neck...' (41) – but this construction of masculinity in Williams appears always threatened. Savran explains:

> [m]asculinity in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* […] is a site of division and instability […]. Williams flaunts and magnifies the contradictions on which masculinity, and patriarchal relations generally, are founded. Homosexual desire is cast not as masculinity's anathema but as that which always already inheres inside the male subject (like a cancer). [43]

For this reason, it is not under the ghost of any pathology that Big Daddy tells Brick that he was sexually involved with men during his youth. Big Daddy seems even disposed to accept the possible relation between Brick and Skipper; after all, homoerotic desire is a mark of the lands he inherited: 'One thing you can grow on a big place more important than cotton! – is *tolerance!* – I grown it' (89), says Big Daddy.

Savran defines the body construction of these characters as places of conflict. Big Daddy incorporates the homo and heterosexuality, represented respectively, by an anti-homophobic speech and a misogynistic speech, this last one particularly evident on his references to Big Mama. In the same way, Brick is an alcoholic and walks on crutches, due to a broken ankle, keeping, however, a firm and thin body, like a teenager.[44]

At the beginning of their conversation, Big Daddy wants to know the reason for the fracture in Brick's leg, asks him about what he was doing on the previous day at three in the morning on the football field. Brick had already answered this question

[43] Savran, p. 101.
[44] Ibid. p. 106.

in the first act: in a gesture of nostalgia for a time passed, he affirms that he wanted to jump barriers, an activity that he did while he was under the influence of alcohol – 'people like to do what they used to do, even after they've stopped being able to do it...' (46), says Brick.

Brick's status as object of desire is also due, to a certain measure, to his silent presence: 'You know what I like to hear most?' – asks Brick to Big Daddy – 'Solid quiet. Perfect unbroken quiet.' (67). Brick, to some extent is a character who inhabits another period. Allan in *Streetcar* is a character of the past, recovered through memory, and Brick inhabits in this memory of a past, when he was strong, healthy and sure of his sexuality.

Not only in the dialogue between Brick and Maggie in the first act, but also in the one between Brick and Big Daddy in the second act, speeches are continuously interrupted by the abrupt entrance of another character, or by the children's noise, or by the music and fireworks of the party that was taking place in the exterior of the house. Intimacy cannot, therefore, take place – the private sphere is continuously haunted by the public sphere. Savran sees this space of action of the play (Brick and Maggie's bedroom) as the closet. It is the space where the characters reveal themselves in intimacy, the place where, in past times, Straw and Orchello materialized their desire, and it is also a space continuously policed and guarded.[45]

The bedroom/closet is the place from which Brick verbalizes and (de)constructs, with Maggie and Big Daddy, not only his sexual identity, but also Skipper's. It is in this same space that Big Daddy's cancer is revealed and that Big Daddy and Big Mama – separately, on different occasions, admit to considering Brick their only son – a truth which Gooper always knew, as we find out on the third

[45] Ibid. p. 104.

act. However, this closet is far from being the place where only the truth is revealed. It is, equally, where the disguise and the deceit is constructed: it is here that Maggie will reveal her (fake) pregnancy. As John Clum questions: 'what is the closet but a system of proscriptions on language?'[46]

In the growing violence in the dialogue between father and son, Brick reiterates in one word what lead him to drinking: 'DISGUST!' (78). Further into the text, Brick says: 'Have you ever heard the word 'mendacity'? […] Yes, lying and liars.' (79). Brick drinks because it is the only way to take him to tranquillity, away from lies.

The lies, the half-truths, what is left unspoken, seem to be the great generators of anguish in *Cat* – 'I don't know what, it's always like something was left unspoken' (82), says Big Daddy, frustrated with the result of his conversation with Brick. Big Daddy confesses that he dealt with lying during all his life. For forty years he has been faking affection for Big Mama, when he cannot even stand her smell, in the same way he pretends to like Gooper, Mae and the children. Brick seems to be the only object of affection to Big Daddy: '*You* I *do* like for some reason, did always have some kind of real feeling for – affection – respect – yes, always...' (81).

Big Daddy tells Brick that he heard, from Gooper and Mae, that Brick's relation with Skipper was not 'normal' and that it was since Skipper died that he started drinking. Brick's speech that follows is marked by a strong homophobic feeling in a rejection of his own sexual dissidence: 'Oh, *you* think so, too, you call me your son and a queer.' (86). Big Daddy is reinforced as a kind of 'patrilineal' vehicle of that same dissidence, when Brick says: 'Oh! Maybe that's why you put

[46] Clum, p. 212.

Maggie and me in this room that was Jack Straw's and Peter Orchello's, in which that pair of old sisters slept in a double bed where both of 'em died!' (86). Brick seems to live in the shadow of that ghost – after all, this was also Skipper's destiny. This idea is reinforced when Big Daddy remembers that after Jack's death, Peter stopped eating and this drove him to his death, comparing this situation with the one happening to Brick after Skipper's death. Brick's reaction reveals a language even more explicit: 'You think me an' Skipper did, did, did! – *sodomy!* – together?' (87). Brick argues that the only thing that was not 'normal' in his relation with Skipper was the fact that their relation was free of lies and he affirms that it was Maggie who convinced Skipper that their relation was something more than friendship. Brick affirms that it should have been to prove the contrary that Skipper slept with Maggie, but he then reveals that his friend was not able to have sexual relations with her and it was this that convinced him that Maggie was right about his sexual identity.

Skipper talked one last time with Brick on the telephone, confessing his love for him. Big Daddy accuses Brick of, in the moment of the call, not having the courage to face the truth – a principle that he defends so much – hanging up the phone. Brick affirms that the truth that Big Daddy is talking about is Skipper's truth and not his, but immediately after, Big Daddy reverts the question. Brick's reaction reveals ambiguity regarding his sexual identity, when he replies: '*His* truth, not *mine*!.' Big Daddy reinforces this question by saying: 'His truth, okay! But you wouldn't face it with him!.' In reply to this, Brick says 'Who *can* face the truth? Can *you*?' (92), and this way the second act ends with this ambiguous note in relation to Brick's sexuality. The game of truth proceeds with the revelation that Big Daddy has cancer and is terminally ill.

At the beginning of the third act, the family reunites to tell Big Mama about Big Daddy's sickness. Right after, Gooper raises the topic of inheritance. Brick purposely stands aside from these two situations. However, the central dramatic element of this third act happens when Big Mama tells Maggie that the thing she wants the most in this life is for her to have a child with Brick. It is here that Maggie announces being pregnant, to the amazement of the family.

When everybody leaves the room to help Big Daddy who screams in pain, Maggie and Brick stay alone. The announcement of the (fake) pregnancy instills a new strength in Maggie, when she states: 'Brick, I used to think that you were stronger than me and I didn't want to be overpowered by you. But now, since you've taken to liquor – you know what? I guess it's bad, but now I'm stronger than you and I can love more truly!' (122). This power role inversion and the way in which Williams constructs the relationship between Brick and Maggie, questions all the presuppositions of gender role stability, according to the model imposed by the Cold War America. The gender construction appears as continuously penetrable: it is Maggie, who now holds the power in their relation.

Maggie just needs to actually conceive a child with Brick: 'make the lie true' (123). For that reason, she hides all the bottles, threatening him that she will only give them back to him when he makes love to her. All the final sequence of the original version of the third act, only reinforces Brick's sexual ambiguity. On the one hand, the fake pregnancy announcement reinforces Brick's ambiguous sexuality, but also confers centrality to the memory character, Skipper. On the other hand, when Maggie tells Brick that she consulted a gynaecologist who assured her that she could get pregnant, Brick questions why she wants to have a child from a man who only feels repulsion for her. In the end, Maggie makes her final move of seduction,

holding the recently acquired hegemonic status: ‘Oh, you weak people, you weak, beautiful people! – who give up. – What you want is someone to – take hold of you. – Gently, gently, with love! And – I *do* love you, Brick, I *do*!’ (123). The play ends with an answer from Brick that reinforces Brick’s ambiguous sexuality: ‘Wouldn’t that be funny if that was true?’ (123).

Possibly the most explicit language about homosexuality that appears in the second act could have been performed on a Broadway stage as a reference to Brick’s past. But on the other hand, the reinforcement of that sexual ambiguity, perpetuated by the silence of that character in the third act of the original version, as well as his last line that closes the play and that represents the dissolution of the nuclear family model, could hardly be performed on Broadway.

The ‘Broadway Version’ of the third act recovers the presence on stage of Big Daddy, assuming for this character the dramatic centrality of the act, and presents the reader with a kind of redemption for Brick: in the beginning of the act, he asks Maggie to force him to enter into a rehabilitation clinic, assuming, equally, his presence in the discussions of family matters. In this version, also the pregnancy of Maggie gains another dimension: by making the announcement in front of Big Daddy, this character mentions that first thing in the morning he wants to change his will in favour of Brick. On the other hand, Maggie’s pregnancy initiates a normativization of her relation with Brick, from the moment he defends her, confirming his wife’s pregnancy in front of the skepticism of his brother and sister-in-law. In the final sequence, with the couple alone in the bedroom, the last sentence of Brick is almost of reconciliation: ‘I admire you, Maggie.’ (158). The play ends with the physical contact between Brick and Maggie, indicating the possibility of the lie becoming true. The ‘Broadway Version’ represents, therefore, the contingencies

of the domestic revival and closes the possible threat of the representation of the homoerotic desire.

Of all of Williams's plays written before he came out publicly in the 1970s, *Cat* is the only play in which two male characters openly discuss homosexuality. In the other plays, female characters reconstruct absent homosexual characters and their sexual transgressions are softened and treated euphemistically or are completely absent. Furthermore, despite in some way addressing homosexuality negatively, *Cat* cannot be separated from the intolerant society of the 1950s, a society of compulsory heterosexuality, of gay bashing, and of homophobia. Thus, through a partially negative portrayal of homosexuality, Williams makes the stage a site of resistance to 'an American society unwilling to confront the truth of homosexuality and individual difference.'[47]

Stigmatization of Homosexual Desire in *Suddenly, Last Summer*

In the pre-Liberation period, the play that would initially appear to present homosexuality in its most negative light is *Suddenly, Last Summer*.[48] Its allegory is only too easily translated for those critics bent on highlighting Williams's fears about the destructive and promiscuous homosexual. Alan Sinfield, for example, regards it as 'Williams' most homophobic play', an unsubtle creation coming after years of trying to 'get into the public domain an analysis of the harassment suffered by sexual dissidents in that society.'[49] However, as examined in *Streetcar* and *Cat*, the

[47] Shackelford, p. 16.

[48] *Suddenly, Last Summer* had its Broadway premiere at the York Theatre in New York, on January 7, 1958, together with other play entitled *Something Unspoken*, with the unified titled of *Garden District*. Hortense Alden played the role of Mrs. Venable and Anne Meachan played the role of Catherine. In 1959, Joseph L. Mankiewicz directed the film version of *Suddenly, Last Summer*, with Katharine Hepburn as Violet Venable and Elizabeth Taylor as Catherine.

[49] Sinfield, pp. 192-93.

playwright found, in the little room given to dissect Allan's or Brick/Skipper's situation, a subliminal way to examine details of gay life.

Sebastian Venable – the homosexual character reconstructed through memory in *Suddenly* – can also be considered a symbol of masculine physical beauty at its peak, as Stanley in *Streetcar* and Brick in *Cat*. Blanche, Sebastian, his mother, Violet Venable (and to a certain measure Brick) are all obsessed with their youth and live in a continuous anxiety about the way in which they present themselves to others. All three characters have an enormous theatrical consciousness, a consciousness of presentation and construction of themselves as performers, as fiction. Christopher Bigsby interprets in the following terms this consciousness in Blanche:

> Blanche is self-consciously her own playwright, costume designer, lightning engineer, scenic designer and performer. […] The dramas which she enacts – southern belle, sensitive virgin, sensuous temptress, martyred daughter, wronged wife – are all carefully presented performances embedded in their own narrative contexts.[50]

Bigsby's analysis can also be applied to Sebastian. This character, despite being a symbol of masculine physical beauty at its peak, like Stanley and Brick, was a closeted homosexual, wrote poetry and is now dead. A poet, like Allan in *Streetcar*, the professional occupation of Sebastian is his own life, as his mother explains: 'You see, strictly speaking, his *life*, was his occupation.'[51] Sebastian lived by his poetry, something of a mask for his homosexual predilections. In this play, the poet is not merely synonymous with the homosexual. Poetry and oral storytelling are variously

[50] Bigsby, p. 4.

[51] Tennessee Williams, 'Suddenly Last Summer', in *Baby Doll and Other Plays,* (London: Penguin, 2001 [1958]), pp. 113-58 (p. 114). Subsequent references to Tennessee Williams's *Suddenly, Last Summer* will be will be placed within parentheses in the text and will be to this edition, unless stated otherwise.

used as means of covering and uncovering the truth that kills Sebastian, that exposes him to the mother, who denies his sexual 'aberrance' at the same time as she procures boys for him in Cabeza de Lobo. Violet cannot understand Sebastian's homosexuality; it is an unacceptable truth which she tries to hide and keep enclosed within Catherine's mind. But Sebastian's homosexuality is implied in the play by Violet's constant reference to his 'looks' and 'charm' which 'keep ahead of pursuers.' According to his mother, Sebastian was devoted to 'a celibate life.' However, he 'insisted upon good looks in people around him' and he had a little 'court of young and beautiful people' surrounding him all the time (121).

Sebastian wrote a poem per year, one for each trip he did in the summer. For years he travelled with his mother, but during his last summer, he decided to do this trip with his cousin Catherine. As in *Streetcar*, where Blanche is silenced, here Catherine is admitted to a psychiatric institution, at her aunt's insistence, so that the truth about that summer is erased from Catherine's memory. Violet invites Dr. Cukrowics to her house and tries to persuade him to perform a lobotomy on Catherine. She wants to continue living with the idea that her son was a bachelor, and hide the truth. Catherine knows and threatens to make public that her cousin for years used his mother as bait to attract young boys, and that during that last summer, when Violet was sick and notoriously older, he decided to invite Catherine, much younger, to serve as bait to sexual partners for him. Catherine explains to the Doctor: 'Don't you understand? I was PROCURING for him!' (152). D. A. Miller suggests that Catherine is used as a 'device for giving utterance to the story of Sebastian, the homosexual who, […] by means of her recollection becomes its true protagonist.'[52]

[52] D. A. Miller, 'Visual Pleasure in 1959', in *Out Takes: Essays on Queer Theory and Film*, ed. by Ellis Hanson (London: Duke University Press, 1999), pp. 97-125 (p. 35).

Drawing on this, Sebastian finds in her the means to facilitate his own homosexual activity which he cannot control until it devours him.

It is equally implied in the play that the Sebastian's tragedy was a result of his close bond with his mother. Violet accuses Catherine of not knowing how to help her son in one of his depressive moments and resents the fact that Sebastian broke something sacred between a mother and a son. The affirmation of Catherine is a clear allusion of 'momism' in Williams: 'Yes! Yes, something had broken, that string of pearls that old mothers hold their sons by like a – sort of a – sort of – *umbilical cord, long – after...*' (150). In the 1950s, in a perverse accusation of the ruling power against a system it created, American women were accused of overprotection and excess of affectivity in the education of their children, being the women responsible for them becoming communists or homosexuals.[53] The mother was accused of being overprotective with her children, inhibiting them sexually and discouraging more masculine attitudes:

> [t]hough no consensus existed among midcentury experts on the root cause of a male homosexual orientation-most psychiatrists attributed it to family dynamics, that is, weak fathers and strong mothers (patterns that could themselves be socially induced) -the notion that homosexuality was in large part an acquired trait that resulted from men's 'adaptive failure' to cope with modern life gained an audience.[54]

[53] Savran, p. 64.

[54] K. A. Cuordileone, '"Politics in an Age of Anxiety": Cold War Political Culture and the Crisis in American Masculinity, 1949-1960', *The Journal of American History*, 87 (Sep. 2002), 530.

This phenomenon, designated as 'momism', is understood by Alan Sinfield as a way of blaming women for the difficulties that American men experienced in fitting into an oppressive and ideologically contradictory masculinity.[55]

Suddenly starts with Violet taking a walk with the Doctor through Sebastian's garden. Williams writes that this garden has an anthropomorphic nature – 'There are massive tree-flowers that suggest organs of a body, torn out, still glistening with undried blood' (113) – and where Sebastian's special specimen, the Venus flytrap, a carnivorous plant, is now dying. It is also under the symbol of cannibalism and the carnivorous that Sebastian dies.

When leaving a restaurant with Catherine, he is chased in the streets of Cabeza de Lobo by a group of boys – naked, in Catherine's description – who, when they reach him, take his clothes off and eat him alive. The naked pale body of Sebastian lying on the floor, mutilated and bloody (an allusion to the martyr Saint Sebastian), does not impede it from being an object of desire – the flesh is the symbol of desire in *Suddenly*, a desire associated with cannibalism. When Catherine sees the blond hair of the Doctor reflected with light while in the garden, she remembers Sebastian: 'Cousin Sebastian said he was famished for blonds, […] that's how he talked about people, as if they were – items on a menu.' (130). The desire overtook all the words and all the inhabited or created spaces by Sebastian.

The act of cannibalism can be viewed as the inevitable culmination of homosexual desire in Williams's works. Williams's concern according to my reading is not with using Sebastian as a representative of all homosexuals in the 1950s (or even as a parallel to his own homosexuality), but with exemplifying through him the image of the self-consumption of the identifiable self. In other words, Sebastian's

[55] Sinfield, p. 226.

body represents this identifiable self (his homosexuality) which is unavoidably destroyed as a result of the self's unbridled desire to satisfy itself. So by being consumed with desire, the consequence is death which is the punishment for expressing his desire in a heteronormative system. As Steve Bruhm argues: '[t]his system uses cannibalism as a trope for the social anxiety surrounding homosexuality. It exagerates the anxiety of one male's relationship with another, of a mutually consumptive bond between men, and then turns the trope against itself.'[56] Bruhm's argument can be applied to *Streetcar* and *Cat* as well, as the three plays offer different views on the dependence of homosocial/homosexual relations in relation to the heteronormative system they are part of.

Any reading of the play as a moral parable about the excesses of homosexual acts is an oversimplification. Though dead, Sebastian's presence is everywhere. He is central to a power struggle in the present between Violet and Catherine, as Van Laan argues: '[c]ontrary to much that has been written, it is not a study of Sebastian Venable, sensationalistic or otherwise; rather, it dramatizes a conflict between opposing versions (or visions) of Sebastian, and especially a conflict for supremacy between the two who hold them.'[57] The homophobic reading of *Suddenly* that straightforwardly equates homosexuality with guilt and self-loathing overlooks the play's more wide-reaching exploration of desire. As Michael Paller puts it, 'Sebastian is a monster not because he is homosexual, but because he is a selfish exploiter.'[58]

[56] Steven Bruhm, 'Blackmailed by Sex: Tennessee Williams and the Economics of Desire', *Modern American Drama,* 3 (1991), 533.

[57] Thomas F. Van Laan, ''Shut Up!' 'Be Quiet' 'Hush!': Talk and Its Suppression in Three Plays by Tennessee Williams."', *Comparative Drama,* 22 (1988), 257.

[58] Paller, p. 149.

Queer Ghosts

The homosexual character, in Williams's theatre – at least the character more explicitly indicated as such – appears as a memory of the past. *A Streetcar Named Desire, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and *Suddenly, Last Summer* are examples of the representation of homosexuality through absence – gay characters are never physically materialized – being mainly represented through memory reconstructions. Williams's gay politics register the presence of absence. Skipper, Allan and Sebastian died at the peak of their physical beauty and are remembered by their weakness and sensibility. This decision by Williams may be interpreted as a compromise: on the one hand, a strategy of representation of his own dissident sexuality, or on the other hand, a way of obtaining recognition of his work by mainstream audiences.

A queer examination of Williams's theatre allows a special attention to be given to certain codes of language and action. It is from very conception of camp as disguise – as performance – that we can read Blanche as a homosexual transvestite subject. Indeed, instead of appropriating characters like Allan or Sebastian – or even Skipper or Brick – the gay culture reclaims Blanche to their common imaginary. This may be due to the strong erotic presence of this character. Moreover, this same eroticism may be much closer to an economy of homoerotic desire, associated with a will to express a socially repressed sexuality. As Jack Babuscio concludes, referring to Blanche and a group of feminine characters in Williams's theatre:

> [g]ayness […] found relief in the form of female guise […] These characters do express their creator's own 'unacceptable' emotions as a gay man. They all do declare the nature of Williams's own fantasy life at the time of their creation. In them the artist has found a means of dealing with the tensions that plagued and

> defined him – tensions that reside in such dualities as flesh/spirit, promiscuity/pride, youth/(old) age.[59]

According to Alan Sinfield, if the objective of censorship was to exclude the representations of homosexuality from the American stages, it was not successful. It conferred to this same theatre a privileged subversively queer position.[60] So without claiming that Tennessee Williams was a militant, whose only aim was to discuss things queer, he certainly had an interest in 'finding ways for this silenced majority to be allowed to speak.'[61] And, in *A Streetcar Named Desire, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof,* and *Suddenly, Last Summer,* Williams allowed them to speak by queering before and beside the texts.

[59] Jack Babuscio, 'The Cinema of Camp (Aka Camp and the Gay Sensibility)', in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject,* ed. by Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), pp. 117-35 (p. 132).

[60] Sinfield, p. 113.

[61] Miller, p. 99.

CHAPTER II

Queer Transgressions:

Gay/Queer Confrontations in Mart Crowley's *The Boys in the Band*

> If society can be said to be on the defensive, then it must follow that the forces of the homosexual minority are consolidating for the exploration and exploitation of that defense.
>
> - Donald Webster Cory and John LeRoy, *The Homosexual and His Society: A View from Within*, 1963

The Boys in the Band and the End of the Closet

During the years leading up to the Stonewall riots, it was primarily within the avant-garde, underground and Off-Broadway theatres that gay explicitness evolved. Influenced by similar experiments within avant-garde and underground cinema by such filmmakers as Kenneth Anger, Andy Warhol and the Kuchar brothers, sexual dissidence and camp performance were freely explored in such a liberated environment. Underground theatre venues such as John Vaccaro and Ronald Tavel's 'Playhouse of the Ridiculous' in New York, for example, specialized in:

> extravagantly transvestite performance - pop, multi-media, loosely plotted, improvisatory, obscenely punning, frenetic, psychodelic, Artaudian, often alluding to old movies. This work may be regarded either as looking back to the drag shows

> of the 1940s and the notion of the gay man as a feminine soul in a masculine body, or as anticipating queer performance theory of the 1990s.[1]

And the drag performance of Charles Ludlam's Ridiculous Theatre Company (1967) exposed, as Stefan Brecht recounts:

> the problem of psycho-sexual identity: to what extent male and female conduct, masculinity and femininity, are social role-identities, cultural artifacts, what they are, might be, should be – how valid these roles are, how natural. Beyond both his enactment of the contemporary role conceptions and his mockery of them, he poses the ideal of a freely and playfully polymorphous sexuality. Or, more generally, the ideal of a free and playful assumption not only of this but of all forms of personal identity and social role.[2]

Rather than become pro-actively involved with the mine-field of gay polemics in the sixties or the earlier inferential approach of gay practitioners in the mainstream (as Tennessee Williams's fifties theatre, examined in the previous chapter), avant-garde artists such as Ludlam deliberately drew upon a rich history of liberated experimentation in the underground, and set out to celebrate a 'perverse culture' in which 'all social(ized) role-identities are not rational (functional) but ridiculous.'[3] Pre-empting queer theoretical debates on identity, performance and gender by over twenty-five years, artists such as Tavel and Ludlam established a practice by which much of contemporary performance theory was later inspired. Then, when the Off-Broadway space became dominated by political and economical

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[1] Alan Sinfield, *Out on Stage: Lesbian and Gay Theatre in the Twentieth Century*, (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 299.

[2] Stefan Brecht, *The Original Theatre of the City of New York: From the Mid-60s to the Mid-70s*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1978), p. 54.

[3] Ibid. p. 55.

pressures, it was in the flats and basements of New York's Greenwich Village that an Off-Off-Broadway space appeared.

Caffè Cino opened in 1958 in Greenwich Village and was the main Off-Off-Broadway space that during the 1960s continuously presented shows – in addition to exhibitions – with explicit gay content, to an audience also constituted by gay individuals.[4] In this space, with approximately fifty seats, Joe Cino, the Italian American owner, had the idea of putting a small stage between the tables, where shows by gay authors were presented, such as Lanford Wilson, Robert Patrick, Jean-Claude Van Italie, William Inge, Tennessee Williams, Oscar Wilde, Jean Genet, William M. Hoofman or Doric Wilson. It was also in this same stage that actors like Al Pacino, Harvey Keitel or Bernadette Peters began their careers. Caffè Cino was the first, during the pre-Stonewall period, of many spaces that later hosted openly gay productions.

In May 1964, Caffè Cino premiered *The Madness of Lady Bright* by Lanford Wilson – which during a time when police used to enter a room interrupting and cancelling shows when they represented explicitly homosexual desire, managed to add a total of 168 performances. *Lady Bright* has as main character a forty-year-old transvestite, who faces a middle-life crisis. Despite the fact that Leslie Bright, the main character of the play, corresponds to a great extent to the gay stereotype of the time (effeminate, promiscuous, depressive and anxious), Wilson's play is of great importance as it lasted on stage, in a time where representations of homosexuality were forbidden in New York stages. Only in 1967, the same year that Joe Cino committed suicide, was the Wales Padlock Act of the New York Penal Code was abolished. Caffè Cino closed in the following year.

[4] Martin Duberman, *Stonewall*, (New York: Plume, 1994), p. 60.

According to Jeffrey Escoffier, the five years before the Stonewall riots were determining in the history of the homosexual cause in America. On the one hand, events that took place during these years questioned the great American values, and on the other, these were years that shaped culturally the gay community post-Stonewall. Organizations that were created such as the civil rights movements, the anti-war student movements and the Women's Movement were decisive in the structurization of this process. The sexually liberated 1970s were formed around the quest for affirmation, identity and legitimacy, having as a model these organized minorities that outlined the first steps of identity politics.[5]

[5] For a detailed historical account of the years leading to the Stonewall riots see, for example, John Loughery, *The Other Side of Silence: Men's Lives and Gay Identities. A Twentieth-Century History*, (New York: Henry Holt, 1998). The ideology and strategy of the homophile movement characterized the years preceding the riots, which is the name given to that somewhat loose collection of disparate organizations, committees and initiatives which campaigned for law reform and a better understanding of homosexuality in the years before Stonewall. Originating in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century, this movement laid stress on homosexuality as a natural phenomenon and took as its basis the 'scientific' findings of late nineteenth-century sexology – findings which later were characterized as the fruit of the urge at this time to classify and compile. At least, this was the general thrust of a movement which inevitably encompassed within its disparateness a number of conflicting ideologies – ideologies, moreover, in which there is a tendency to self-contradiction. For instance, the homophiles argued that homosexuality was congenital in an attempt to remove it from the category of sin or illness, and took as their premise a belief in the natural origin of all forms of sexuality. But this created a problem for them: if 'normal' heterosexual relations, together with the male/female binary, the sex/gender system and the characteristics conventionally ascribed to men and women, all have their origins in nature and are indeed the central constituents of the natural sexual order, how does homosexuality fit into this scheme of things? The homophiles responded to this with the claim that homosexuality was the natural practice of a 'third' or 'intermediate' sex. But in making this claim they tended to subvert their own argument and strategy, since a 'third' sex – within an essentially binaric view of sexual difference – is inevitably an 'aberration.; It is thus a notion that contradicts the alleged normality of homosexuality – that denies that homosexuals are just like everyone else. Furthermore, there are also indications that the very concept of sexual 'normality' was challenged by groups within the homophile movement (see Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction*, (New York: New York University Press, 2000 [1996]), pp. 24-29). The ideology of the Mattachine Society, one of the first homophile organizations in America, in its early years, for instance, had a strong Marxist slant, which analysed the oppression of homosexuals from an essentially social constructionist standpoint. Hence, it viewed the concept of 'normality' as the creation of forces in society that have a vested interest in the suppression of difference. But when such analysis became dangerous – in a United States gripped by McCarthyism – the Mattachine Society changed dramatically. In short, its oppositional stance became assimilationist: or, as one historian has put it, 'accommodation to social norms replaced the affirmation of a distinctive gay identity (John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States 1940-1970*, (London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 81). The affirmation of a distinctive gay identity is of course the central motivating drive of the later and more militant gay liberation movement. Yet the evolution of this movement parallels that of the former, as the ethnic model of gay identity it promotes becomes absorbed into the mainstream, to be eventually reconfigured (in light of Foucauldian and later developments of social constructionist theory) as itself a form of comodification.

In this context, *The Boys in the Band* has a candour that never before belonged to a mainstream production. The play portrays the life of a group of New York gay individuals conflicted with self-loathing and social accommodation in the end of the 1960s.[6] *The Boys* was first staged during the difficult transition between what is generally known by critics as the closet – where gay subculture lived hidden from mainstream American society – and post-Stonewall gay liberation, where this same subculture gained a place of visibility.

The opening of the *The Boys* by Mart Crowley at Theatre Four on 14 April 1968 was a significant milestone in the representation of dissident sexualities on the American stage. The play, directed by Robert Moore, played over 1,000 performances before it closed on 6 September 1970, and in that same year William Friedkin adapted it into a film. The production became centre of attention from various media and a commercial success as the first play with explicitly gay themes set in a gay household. The play was considered the *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* out of the closet in its extremes of camp comedy and melodrama, the similarity of its structure and dramatic situations, and a version of the game 'Get the Guests', that in Crowley's text has the name 'The Affairs of the Heart.'[7] There is nothing about *The Boys* that could be pointed as disguised homosexual theatre. The play is about gay life from the point of view of gay men.

Crowley stated that he based *The Boys* on his own experiences: '[a]ll of the characters are based on people I either knew well or are amalgams of several I'd

[6] William M. Hoffman argues that the prohibition of producing gay-related plays until 1967 had consequences in the construction of gay characters: 'Silence' (when there was a complete omission of gay-related themes or characters); 'False Accusation' (when a character was negatively accused of being homosexual when he was not); 'Stereotypical' (when the gay man was represented as feminine and the lesbian as masculine, or the gay as emotional or as mentally disturbed); 'Exploration' (when the gay character appeared as comic relief) (Hoffman, p. xix.)

[7] Sinfield, p. 300.

known to varying degrees, plus a large order of myself thrown into the mix.'[8] Originally entitled *The Gay Bar*, *The Boys* is the first play of a trilogy, *The Boys* presents Michael (alter-ego of the author), a gay New Yorker in his thirties; *A Breeze from the Gulf* (1973) is an adolescent portrait of Michael; and *For Reasons that Remain Unclear* (1993) recaptures the same character, renamed Patrick, now forty-five years old, and takes place in Rome.

Despite the transitional period in which this text was produced – seven months after the launch of the first issue of *The Advocate* magazine, still one of the most important publications directed to the American gay community, and fourteen months before the Stonewall riots – this is still a play dominated by guilt as a

[8] Mart Crowley, 'Introduction', in *3 Plays by Mart Crowley,* (Los Angeles: Alyson Publications, 1996), pp. xi-ixx (p. ix). Crowley was born in Vicksburg, Mississippi on 21 August 21 1935 and he used his familiarity with the Southern culture and his personal experience to inform his writing. Crowley's childhood was not a happy one. His father, a tavern-keeper, was an alcoholic, and his mother, who was addicted to both drugs and alcohol, eventually had to spend considerable time in mental institutions. For a respite from his miserable home life, the young Crowley frequented the local movie theatre. After graduating from a Catholic boys' high school in Vicksburg, Crowley enrolled at Catholic University in Washington, D. C. When he received his degree in theatre in 1957, he went to New York, where he became a production assistant to director Elia Kazan on the film *Splendor in the Grass*, based on the play by William Inge. Crowley became friends with the film's star, Natalie Wood, who encouraged him to go to Hollywood to pursue a career in screenwriting. Crowley succeeded in writing a script that was slated for production, but the project was cancelled at the last moment. Other disappointments followed. After these setbacks Crowley was house-sitting for a friend when he wrote a play about a group of gay men. A friend brought the work to the attention of producer Richard Barr, who ran the Playwrights' Unit with Edward Albee. They agreed to put it on in a workshop in January 1968, and Crowley burst onto the literary scene with his best-known work, *The Boys in the Band*. Crowley's next play, *Remote Asylum*, was produced in 1970. The comedy received unfavourable notices and quickly closed. His third play, *A Breeze from the Gulf*, which is based on his memories of growing up in Mississippi, enjoyed a much warmer critical reception but did not find an audience. It had only a six-week run off-Broadway in 1973. Crowley's next stage play, *For Reasons That Remain Unclear*, dealt with the theme of sexual abuse of a student by a Catholic priest. Crowley has stated that the story is a fictionalized version of his own experience. The play was first presented at the Olney Theatre in Maryland. It was optioned for a year, but the production was soon abandoned. A sequel to *The Boys in the Band* premiered in San Francisco in 2002 entitled *The Men from the Boys*. While reviewers generally found the play entertaining, they were somewhat disappointed by the lack of evolution of the characters. While Crowley has never been able to recapture the success and acclaim that he had with his debut play, he deserves honour for having blazed the trail for subsequent gay-themed theatre with *The Boys in the Band*. Although a full-length examination of Crowley's life and work is inexistent, for more see, for example, Billy J. Harbin, Kim Marra, and Robert A. Schanke, 'The Gay & Lesbian Theatrical Legacy: A Biographical Dictionary of Major Figures in American Stage History in the Pre-Stonewall Era', (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), pp. 114-18, Emmanuel S. Nelson, 'Contemporary Gay American Poets and Playwrights: An a-to-Z Guide', (Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 2003), pp. 93-110, and Jackson R. Bryer and Mary C. Hartig, 'The Facts on File Companion to American Drama', (New York: Facts On File, 2010), pp. 111-12.

determining element in the construction of the gay individual. According to Nicolas De Jongh, *The Boys* is located between the transition of two realities: one, in which homosexuality is seen, and felt by the gay individual, as a sin, and second, when a gay identity is proclaimed by the Gay Liberation Front.[9] Gavin Lambert, in the preface to the edition of the trilogy, defines this play as a comedy constructed around a potentially tragic situation: the conflicts between personal instinct and society rules.[10] Lambert argues: '[t]hey're role-players who play their roles (Guilty Catholic, Angry Jew, Flaming Queen, All-American Mixed-Up Kid) to the hilt, and at the same time are trapped in them.'[11]

Gay audiences hated almost everything about the play, and especially in the wake of Stonewall a year after the play's opening, *The Boys* became a symbol for what the next generation of gay men wanted to forget: pathetic, effeminate, self-hating gay men. Indeed, there is no gay pride in Crowley's play, only shame, self-hatred, jealousy, bickering, alcoholism, and regret. Kaier Curtin notes that during the first few weeks, *The Boys* played mainly to gay audiences, but with media attention, it eventually drew a larger number of heterosexuals.[12] As a result, the subsequent hatred against the play from homosexuals resulted from the exposure of the darker side of gay life to a mainstream audience. In a community based on the principals of identity politics, where the gay individual looked for a positive and authentic construction of himself, *The Boys* was interpreted as a negative and artificial representation.[13]

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[9] Nicholas De Jongh, *Not in Front of the Audience: Homosexuality on Stage*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 133.

[10] Gavin Lambert, 'Foreword', in *3 Plays by Mart Crowley*, (Los Angeles: Alyson Publications, 1996), pp. xii-xix (p. xii).

[11] Ibid. p. xii.

[12] Kaier Curtin, *We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians: The Emergence of Lesbians and Gay Men on the American Stage*, (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1987), p. 328.

[13] Michael Paller, *Gentlemen Callers: Tennessee Williams, Homosexuality, and Mid-Twentieth-Century Drama*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 184.

The Boys in the Band is divided in two acts and takes place in Michael's flat – the living room and the bedroom – in Manhattan, where a group of middle-class urban gay friends gathers to celebrate Harold's birthday. It is the unexpected presence of Alan, Michael's friend from Georgetown, Washington, during the party that raises tension in the play. The presence of this (straight) external element works as a device to uncover a series of personal and collective traumas that haunt the individuals of this group. Possibly by Crowley's consciousness in relation to the particular time when the production of the play took place, in historical, political and social terms, the play works as a summary of different attitudes, backgrounds, and experiences of gay men in New York during the 1960s, from common places, fears, anxieties, to cultural references: '[f]or the first time, mainstream audiences see gay men talk openly about their sexual predilections, dance together, kiss, and retire upstairs for sex.'[14] De Jongh sees the play's characters as representative of the urban gay subculture of the 1960s, where the gay individual assumed his homosexual desire, and consumed the benefits that the gay subculture provided him (saunas, bares, nightclubs) but with a great lack of self-esteem.[15]

The play opens with Michael preparing for the party he is hosting and with the arrival of Donald, Michael's ex-lover and closest friend, who lives in the Hamptons, but who comes regularly to Manhattan for his psychiatric appointments. The opening of first act introduces Michael, a 'spoiled rotten, stupid, empty, boring, selfish, self-centred' gay man.[16] In the initial dialogue between Michael and Donald, Donald, while taking his medication, states that he is depressed and that he recently

[14] John M. Clum, *Still Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama*, (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2000), p. 204.

[15] De Jongh, p. 136.

[16] Mart Crowley, 'The Boys in the Band', in *3 Plays by Mart Crowley*, (Los Angeles: Alyson Publications, 1997 [1968]), (p. 10). Subsequent references to Mart Crowley's *The Boys in the Band* will be placed within parentheses in the text and will be to this edition, unless stated otherwise.

understood that the reason for his constant feeling of failure is result of the education he received from his parents:

> DONALD: Naturally, it all goes back to Evelyn and Walt.
>
> MICHAEL: Naturally. When doesn't it go back to Mom and Pop? Unfortunately, we all had an Evelyn and Walt. The crumbs! (11).

This reference to 'momism', in the tradition of Tennessee Williams theatre, still presents itself as a psychoanalytic reason and justification for the characters' homosexuality. This kind of rhetoric was first established by Philip Wylie in his 1942 book *Generation of Vipers*, which had a major impact in Cold War America: 'the growing fear of a rise of male homosexuality was the single most important reason for the dread of momism.'[17] Michael defines himself as a thirty-year-old spoiled child, who jumps from country to country, from bar to bar, and from bed to bed, looking for pleasure, living above his economical possibilities. He says he was raised by his mother as a girl, without his father having ever intervened against it, but the invocation that Crowley inserts into the play in relation to this psychoanalytical explanation that puts the gay individual as victim of 'momism' is not here placed in a pragmatic way. Michael is conscious that this is just a reductive theory, opposing an idea of personal affirmation in relation to victimization: 'And don't get me wrong. I know it's easy to cop out and blame Evelyn and Walt and say it was *their* fault. That we were simply the helpless put-upon victims. But in the end, we are responsible for ourselves.' (16).

While Donald takes a shower, the phone rings. It is Alan, a straight friend from college, who is in New York, and wants to meet Michael. Michael ends up

[17] K. A. Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 133.

inviting him to the party, but he is considerably worried about a straight man joining a gay party: 'I mean, they look down on people in the *theater* – so whatta you think he'll feel about this *freak show* I've got booked for dinner?!' (18).

Emory, an interior decorator, Larry, a promiscuous artist, and Hank, a schoolteacher who left his wife to move in with Larry, an unusual, not to say radical act in 1960's America, are the next guests to arrive. Larry and Donald recognize each other, exchanging a few words throughout the night, and only later in the play is it revealed that they met before in the gay circuit and slept together, but they did not know each other's names. Another guest of the party, who arrives alone, is Bernard – the only African American in the party. Michael's greatest concern regarding Alan's visit is Emory's behaviour: '*No camping!'* (30), he says to Emory. Even in Michael's private space, he asks for heteronormative social norms to be respected and enforced while Alan is in the apartment, basically asking his friends to tone down their homosexuality. Emory refuses, however, to tone down his campiness.

Later, another phone call from Alan reveals that he is no longer coming to the party, and Michael becomes a lot more relaxed and starts dancing with Bernard, Larry and Emory. The bell rings, but Michael does not hear it, and it is Hank who opens the door. Despite calling to say he was not coming, Alan surprises Michael and shows up while they are dancing. Within 1960s heteronormativity, a group of men dancing together is a visible sign of homosexual behaviour and Alan's entrance interrupting the dance visibly represents the conflict between straight and gay society. Michael, embarrassed, presents the only representative of the straight world to the group. Alan likes Hank from the beginning, with whom he later discovers he has something in common: a marriage and children. They talk about common interests, but Hank does not reveal that he left his family to live a relationship with

Larry. In a private conversation in the bedroom between Michael and Alan, Alan, despite leaving a certain sexual ambivalence after commenting Hank's handsome body, expresses that he does not like Emory:

> ALAN: I just can't stand that kind of talk. It just grates on me.
>
> MICHAEL: What kind of talk, Alan?
>
> ALAN: Oh, you know. His brand of humor, I guess. (51).

Alan likes Hank and even Donald as these characters are the ones who embody a more manly masculinity. On the other hand, his speech about Emory has obvious homophobic outlines, as he considers Emory too effeminate. This feeling ends up being verbalized when Alan, now in the living room, initiates a verbal conflict with Emory: 'Faggot, fairy, pansy... queer, cocksucker! I'll kill you, you goddamn little mincing swish! You goddam freak! FREAK! FREAK!' (59). This conflict ends in physical aggression when Alan punches Emory in the face.

What lead to this conflict was Emory's refusal to accommodate Alan's arrival by toning down his homosexuality, continuously using pronouns and gender-switching through name-calling, emphasized by his effeminacy. Emory defies heteronormativity though his campiness and simultaneously promotes a queer identity. Camp has become an object of theoretical discourse since the publication of Susan Sontag's article 'Notes on Camp', in 1964, in the *Partisan Review*, where the author interprets camp not only as an aesthetical phenomenon, but also as a theatrical device in one's presentation to the 'other.'[18] Jack Babuscio in 1977 defines camp as gay sensibility:

[18] Susan Sontag, 'Notes on Camp', in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, ed. by Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), pp. 53-65 (pp. 54-55).

> I define gay sensibility as a creative energy reflecting a consciousness that is different from the mainstream; a heightened awareness of certain human complications of feeling that spring from the fact of social oppression; in short, a perception of the world which is coloured, shaped, and defined by the fact of one's gayness.[19]

To Didier Eribon, camp is not only a particular gay sensibility, but it is mainly a strategy of defiance in relation to heteronormativity by appropriating effeminacy as a powerful tool of subversion.[20] Thus, and in relation to Emory in *The Boys*, his campiness is exactly that: a theatrical gay sensibility that when faced with heteronormative hostility is projected against that oppressive force.

The two last characters to join the party are Cowboy and Harold. Cowboy is a twenty-two-year-old male hustler, blond and fit – 'too pretty' (5), in Crowley's description – and Emory hired him as a birthday gift to Harold. During dinner, Michael says: 'Ladies and gentlemen. Correction: Ladies and ladies, I would like to announce that I have just eaten Sebastian Venable.' Cowboy says he doesn't know what that is: 'Not *what*, stupid. *Who*. A character in a play. A fairy who was eaten alive. I mean the chop-chop variety.' (77), says Michael. Throughout the play, several other cultural references are made, from actresses (Barbara Stanwyck, Bettie Davies), films (*Sunset Boulevard*, *The Wizard of Oz*), songs by Judy Garland, and theatre (Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee, William Inge), all appropriated as gay subculture. By making these stereotypical camp references to actresses, films, music and theatre, Crowley is also queering them and exploring their subversive power. Michael's own sexual appetite is a direct reference to Sebastian in *Suddenly, Last*

[19] Jack Babuscio, 'The Cinema of Camp (Aka Camp and the Gay Sensibility)', in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject,* ed. by Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), pp. 117-35 (p. 118).

[20] Didier Eribon, *Reflexiones Sobre La Cuestión Gay,* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2001), p. 130.

Summer: 'Bored with Scandinavia, try Greece. Fed up with dark meat, try light.' (14), says Michael about himself in the beginning of *The Boys*. Additionally, Crowley also constructs these characters with a theatrical consciousness. There are moments in the play where the characters seem to be directing themselves as in a play inside the play, as for example when Alan finally comes from upstairs and Michael says: 'Oh, hello, Alan. Feel better? This is where you come in, isn't it?' (85). Babuscio argues in his analysis of camp that theatricality is one of its main dynamics: 'camp, by focusing on the outward appearances of role, implies that roles, and in particular, sex roles, are superficial – a matter of style. Indeed, life itself is role and theatre, appearance and impersonation.'[21] Thus, even in a more subliminal way than in Emory's visible campiness, camp undermines the heternormativity and homophobia present in the text.

In the second act, Michael presents the rules of the game 'The Affairs of the Heart': each one of the guests has to call one person that they really love or loved, say their name and express their feelings. While Michael explains how the scoring of the game works, Alan surprises everyone when he asks Hank to leave with him. Michael says ironically: 'Just the two of you together. The pals... the guys... the buddy-buddies... the he-men.' (91). Hank does not know how to explain his situation to Alan, but Michael intervenes again, resolving the misunderstanding: 'Alan... Larry and Hank are lovers. Not just roommates, *bed*mates. *Lovers*.' (92).

In *The Boys* heteronormativity is not undermined solely by camp, but also by the same device examined in Williams's plays: an ambiguity in the construction of masculinity that questions if that masculinity is synonym of an heteronormative sexuality, or just a performance that hides a dissident sexuality. Michael destroys

[21] Babuscio, p. 123.

Alan's idea that manliness, even in a man that is married and has children, is not more than that, a performance. Masculinity is property both of the heterosexual individual as well as the homosexual. This duality is expressed by Crowley by depicting Alan and Hank as characters who share everything – both Alan and Hank are manly, were married and have children. These external elements, regulated by an heteronormative power, is the place for a false stability and for gender deception. According to Judith Butler, the destabilization of this coherence brings to the norm the discontinuities in the construction of gender, as gender does not derive from sex, and desire and sexuality does not derive from gender.[22] Indeed, in *The Boys*, the disruption of this coherence denounces this norm, precisely, as artificial.

The first character to play 'The Affairs of the Heart' is Bernard, but he is not able to make the phone call. It is then Emory's turn. Bernard tries to dissuade him, asking him to keep his dignity. Here, Crowley explores very subliminally the issue of race:

> MICHAEL: Well, *that's* a knee-slapper! I love *your* telling *him* about dignity when you allow him to degrade you constantly by Uncle Tom-ing you to death.
>
> BERNARD: *He* can do it, Michael. *I* can do it. But *you can't* do it.
>
> MICHAEL: Isn't that discrimination?
>
> BERNARD: I don't like it from him and I don't like it from me – but I do it myself and I let him do it. I let him do it because it's the only thing that. To him, makes him my equal. We both got the short end of the stick – but I got a hell of a lot more than he did and he knows it. I let him Uncle Tom me just so he can tell himself he's not a complete loser. (102)[23]

[22] Judith Butler, 'From Interiority to Gender Performatives', in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject,* ed. by Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), pp. 136-42 (p. 362).

[23] The term 'uncle tomism' had its origin in the character Uncle Tom from the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) by Harriet Beecher Stowe – the author also adapted the novel into a play entitled

Bernard is mainly represented by Michael's speech as the stereotype of the African American who works as servant to white southern families. Bernard is constructed as a victim, assuming a masochist position in his relation with Emory, but this is a deal agreed between both parts. It is according to Bernard a relation of equal to equal, in the sense they are both individuals existing in a marginalized group: Bernard is an African American and a homosexual and Emory is homosexual and effeminate, which does not provide him with the privileges that white masculinity offers.

Emory also fails to identify himself in the phone call and the following player is Hank, who surprises Larry when he calls his phone recorder and leaves a message saying he loves him. Alan intervenes for the first time since the beginning of the game, asking him not to do that. Michael already told Alan about Larry and Hank's relationship, thus, Alan's impulse to ask Hank not to do that is to prevent the verbalization of that same feeling.

In the argument that follows this scene, Larry and Hank discuss questions of behaviour and sexual identity that will be central in a gay discourse that started to come together after Stonewall. Larry and Hank's relationship does not follow an heteronormative model of monogamy. In their relationship, Hank wants to be sexually and affectively involved with Larry and does not want to have any other sexual partners, while, Larry, on the other side, proclaims independence and sexual freedom.

Larry is the following player. He dials a number and the telephone in Michael's bedroom rings – it is Michael's private line. Larry asks Hank to go upstairs and pick up the phone, and this way wins the game with the maximum score:

The Christian Slave (1855). The expression 'uncle tomism' is employed to define black men as non-conflictive and domesticated.

he manages to talk with the person he loves the most, identifies himself and tells him he loves him. Larry then goes upstairs to meet Hank and they both stay there until the end of the play, making for the one happy ending of the play. Through Larry and Hank's relationship, Crowley also certainly makes a statement: Larry and Hank are the most masculine of the gay guests, they have active professions, and they establish their relationship between the desire for sexual variety and the need for a stable relationship.

However, Michael's intention for playing this game was not accomplished. He wants to find out if Alan is gay – a 'closet queen', in his words. Michael wants Alan to admit that he had sexual relations with Justin Stuart, an ex-colleague from college. He says that Justin, his ex-lover, told him that he slept several times with Alan, but Alan continuously says that this is not true:

> It is a lie. A vicious lie. He'd say anything about me now to get even. He could never get over the fact that *I* dropped *him*. But I had to. I had to because... he told me... he told me about himself... he told that he wanted to be my lover. And I... I... told him... he made me sick... I told him I pitied him. (121).[24]

Michael's discomfort with his homosexuality is first revealed when he proposes 'The Affairs of the Heart.' His ultimate goal with the game – besides the public humiliation of the participants – is to show that homosexual desire and truth cannot go together. Telling the truth, revealing a desire, is to show a weakness, and

[24] The dramatic situation in which Alan is placed and his own speech is very similar to Brick's in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. In the second act of Williams's play, in his dialogue with Big Daddy, Brick says that Skipper called him and told him he loved him, and that he hung up the phone – this was the last time they spoke. Even if some sort of more intimate relation ever happened, respectively with Justin or Skipper, not Alan or Brick are able to admit it, and even less let those feelings be verbalized.

showing weakness can only be allowed in a private circle – in this party, among equals – and never in the heteronormative circle.

In the end, after failing to find out if Alan is gay, Michael now without pills, alcohol, or psychiatric help, lets all his doubts and sexual anguishes come out. Harold, on the other side, reacts violently in relation to Michael negative view of his homosexuality:

> You are a sad and pathetic man. You're a homosexual and you don't want to be. But there is nothing you can do to change it. Not all your prayers to God, not all the analysis you can buy in all the years you've got left to live. You may very well one day be able to know a heterosexual life if you want it desperately enough – if you pursue it with the fervor with which you annihilate – but you will always be homosexual as well. Always, Michael. Always. Until the day you die. (124-25).

For moments in the play such as this particular one, for more than four decades *The Boys* has infuriated audiences. Gay audiences do not respond well to Michael's death-sentencing 'You show me a happy homosexual, and I'll show you a gay corpse.' (128). Emory's effeminacy is also insufferable to post-Stonewall gay audiences, who do not want to see homosexuality associated with effeminacy. However, it is through this same internalized homophobia and femininity that queerness is represented in *The Boys*. The bravery that Crowley exhibited when he wrote the play has been little appreciated. The play should not be dismissed but respected for calling attention to the destructive effects of the pervasive societal homophobia internalized by pre-Stonewall gay individuals. Emory's campiness should also be valued as a powerful political reaction against oppression, which defies heteronormativity, and promotes a queer identity. After all, before Stonewall,

camp was 'a kind of going public or coming out before the emergence of gay liberationist politics (in which coming out was a key confrontationist tactic).'[25] Gay men can also see it as a piece of pre-Stonewall gay life: '[w]hatever one thinks of it, *The Boys in the Band*, more than any other single play, publicized homosexuals as a minority group.'[26] After all, as its original appearance on stage brackets the Stonewall riots, the play offers essential social background for the most understudied revolution of American history. Alan Sinfield argues inclusively that the play does not only offer social context for the Stonewall riots, but that it also outlines the entire history of the representation of the gay individual in American theatre, closing to a certain extent, a cycle of that same history:

> [b]y making explicit the familiar tropes of gay representation, *Boys in the Band* draws a line under the most significant gay theatre writing of the time. The tradition of discretion and innuendo is reviewed, item-by-item, reoriented, and rendered obsolete. To be sure, the sickness and quasi-tragic models that gay men are supposed to inhabit are still in place at the end. But the outcome of the play is not limited to its explicit statements. As a public theatre event, it helped dislodge the discreet conditions that had determined those models.[27]

In addition to all the subversive elements of the play above detailed, *The Boys in the Band*'s stronger queer construction is Hank and Larry's positive model of homosexuality. Larry and Hank individually construct an identity against heteronormative models and stereotypes. These characters create a model of their own for themselves and their relationship that opens the way to multiplicity in terms

[25] Richard Dyer quoted in Pamela Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna*, (London and Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 4.
[26] See William M. Hoffman quoted in Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet : Homosexuality in the Movies*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), p. 176.
[27] Sinfield, p. 302.

of affection and of choice of the desired object. Larry is not consumed by any feeling of guilt regarding his sexuality and lifestyle, refusing the heteronormative model of monogamy in his relationship with Hank. He has with Hank a sexual and affective relationship, but also has sexual relations with other men – predictive of the open-relationships of post-Stonewall. Larry does not allow any repression of his desire. It is Larry, after all, who wins the game.

Moreover, Hank, who comes from a heterosexual relationship, assumes with normality his homosexuality, and by accepting Larry's terms for their relationship, breaks definitely with the model he has lived in. Thus, the idea of sexual orientation is destroyed as a fixed model in which we are born and in which we die.

Crowley, just like Tavel and Ludlam in the underground, pre-empted queer theoretical debates on identity, performance and gender by over twenty-five years, but in his case, in a successful and commercial play. In Larry's construction, gender is a fluid choice which shifts and changes in different contexts and at different times. Butler's approach is that sex (male/female), which is seen to 'cause' gender (masculine/feminine), which is seen to 'cause' desire (towards the other gender) is a construct and gender and desire are flexible: 'there is no gender identity behind the expression of gender […]. Identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results.'[28] According to Butler, gender is therefore a performance, a form of expressions; it is what a person 'does' at particular times, rather than a universal 'who you are.' Thus, what Judith Butler expressed in her theoretical writings, Mart Crowley constructed in Larry twenty-five years earlier.

[28] Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007 [1990]), p. 25.

CHAPTER III

Queer Failures:

Alterity in Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart,*

Tony Kushner's *Angels in America,*

and Terrence McNally's *Love! Valour! Compassion!*

> Like would-be stars flocking to Hollywood, gay men migrate to the golden gates of Castro Street, where even the clothing store mannequins have washboard stomaches; a liberated zone that calls, 'Give me your weak, your huddled, your oppressed – and your horny, looking for a little action.'
>
> - Randy Shilts, 'Castro Street: Mecca or Ghetto?' *The Advocate*, 1977

Queer Politics/Gay Theatre

Performance and theatricality, as distinctly excessive and open art forms, enabled repressed homosexuality the opportunity to 'escape' the fixity of an oppressive hetero-reality, as previous chapters demonstrated, and most importantly, through dynamics of queer subversion. Through theatre and performance, gay individuals were able to distance themselves from the limitations of their own culturally contentious identity by constructing characters with diverse narrative possibilities. The utopian nature of such a potent place of fantastical re-configuration

also demonstrates its 'essential' attraction to oppressed minorities (of any kind). As Ian Lucas notes:

> [t]heatricality and performance have been associated with the modern homosexual since the term was coined, and popular misconceptions of theatre see it as a business closely associated with, if not dominated by, homosexuals […]. Theatre and theatricality have often been tools used to mask, encode and/or publicize (homo)sexuality, and it is in this respect that the connection between 'gay theatre', theatricality and gay – or, more recently, 'queer' – identity needs to be analysed more closely.[1]

No minority group can really afford to ignore the important opportunity that such a politicized form of theatre holds as an effective disseminator of 'alternative' perspectives or as a subversive deconstructive and signifying tool. Theatre and performance (in their many incarnations) have long been appropriated by emerging political movements to articulate and support their struggles (from public street theatre and agitprop performance to the more experimental processes of the avant-garde). The necessary mobility of political theatre as a form and its direct association with accessible touring circuits and fringe theatres, have provided a vital forum for artistic experimentation to successfully articulate an alternative polemics and the re-interpretation of sexual/social relations.[2]

From the very beginnings of gay and lesbian liberation in the sixties, organized theatrical self-expression and visibility were critical elements of the movement, from empowered street protest to radical performative spectacle.

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[1] Ian Lucas, *Impertinent Decorum: Gay Theatrical Manoeuvres*, (London: Cassell, 1994), p. xii.

[2] For a detailed account of the historical and cultural development of 'political performance' and 'radical theatre' see Baz Kershaw, *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

Formerly taboo and subversive sexual identities were being defiantly visualized and enacted, performed and celebrated in all their polymorphous diversity: 'taking plays to new audiences and representing the experiences of the oppressed and exploited.'[3] As Michelene Wandor argues: '[s]exual politics has introduced an additional, radical critique of the oppressive aspects of another kind of division of labour: that based on gender and the representation of sexuality.'[4]

Synonymous with most cultural industries of the twentieth century, the mainstream theatre 'industry' was also regarded as an operational mechanism of a hetero-patriarchal hierarchy of value, that placed strict ideological control over all artistic expression and product. Influenced by the new wave of aggressive feminism in the sixties, a radical analysis of these repressive power structures and cultural institutions provoked a more suspicious genealogical critique of the representational concepts of gender and sexuality in particular: '[f]eminist and gay activism has so far had its greatest cultural impact in theatre work – overwhelmingly unpublished, only occasionally documented and reviewed, but of fundamental importance to theatre as a whole.'[5]

An alternative theatre movement had begun to be consolidated that sought to challenge the 'repressive aspects of the sexual and the social division of labour' that was seen to be as much a problem in commercial theatre as in society in general.[6] This new environment of political and cultural liberation subsequently gave rise to some important changes within the theatre industry, which reached a notable epoch with the Stonewall riots in 1969. This long overdue achievement made it possible for previously taboo subjects such as homosexuality to finally stake their claim to

[3] Michelene Wandor, *Understudies: Theatre and Sexual Politics*, (London: Methuen, 1981), p. 7.
[4] Ibid. p. 7.
[5] Ibid. p. 7.
[6] Ibid. p. 7.

theatrical and thematic legitimacy, but more importantly to the expression of a newly affirmative gay visibility with a uniquely positive dramaturgical presence (as opposed to its previously stigmatized manifestations).

Although explicit references to homosexuality of a positive nature had been rigorously censored prior to almost the end of the sixties, theatre had always found ways around such oppression through linguistic innuendo and subtextual coding (as examined earlier). However, following the partial decriminalization of homosexuality and the historical impact of the Stonewall riots, the Gay Liberation Front came into being in the summer of 1969. The main concern of this new G.L.F was essentially to encourage visible, defiant demonstrations of homosexual identity, thereby disavowing the shadowy ghetto-like culture of their pre-Stonewall lifestyle. Homosexual theatrical culture had up until this point been devoid of any real form of 'direct' political expression, since the only effective means for subversion within such a social and moral climate lay mainly in the subtexts they were able to encode, or the genders they were contextually 'allowed' to deconstruct. Since the Second World War there has, as Baz Kershaw documents, 'been an explosion of performance beyond theatre' that has 'experimented in unprecedented ways to push back the boundaries of creative freedom.'[7] Regarded as underground, fringe or alternative theatre, the fifties and sixties saw a concerted attempt to reinvent the socio-political role of performance:

> [b]y the end of the twentieth century a plethora of innovative practices could be grouped around these broad headings, including community theatre, grass roots theatre, feminist theatre, women's theatre, lesbian theatre, gay theatre, queer theatre, black theatre, ethnic theatre, guerrilla theatre, theatre in education, theatre in prisons,

[7] Kershaw, p. 59.

> disability theatre, reminiscence theatre, environmental theatre, celebratory theatre, performance art, physical theatre, visual theatre and so on.[8]

The sexually liberated 1970s introduced a newly consolidated political and cultural consciousness of the experience of 'being gay', and the emerging alternative and political theatres were committed to such dissident attempts at taking theatre out to the 'people.' This innovative climate provided the perfect opportunity for the establishment of a specifically gay theatre, but it was also a gay theatre that was evidently (and restrictively) informed by a popular and tested stylistic approach to politicized performance. On a problematic level it projected a form of gay visibility that was on the whole highly filtered, policed and moulded to conform to the accepted vision of gay activism, which also marginalized those more controversial elements of gay culture. A more sanitized, 'desexed' and acceptable (yet equally repressive) performance was foregrounded, but one that was still subject to the requirements and standards of heterocentric, feminist and patriarchal approval, all of whom were still perturbed by such open forms of deviance.

The queer potential that the new gay movement had originally envisaged was, therefore, slowly contained by the move towards social acceptance, which also led to social conformity. The radical performativity that had flourished so openly within the gay underground and in parts of the avant-garde movement, and subliminally within mainstream theatre, which were previously restricted by heteronormative codes of taste and decency, were gradually suppressed with the G.L.F. mainstreaming by the need for empathy and social scrutiny. Contrary to the earlier achievements of homosexual artists who had encoded mainstream iconography with perversity, this new 'open' gay theatre was in fact as a very

[8] Ibid. p. 59.

'closed' medium (particularly by those who did not fit easily with the types of identities and ideologies being promoted, ie. bisexual, transgender, hermaphrodite, etc.).

The consolidation of a theatre that explored homosexuality on a positive and analytical level was (though problematic from a queer perspective) vital at this stage in the gay movement's development, since prior mainstream incarnations had merely been seen as derogatory or self-repressive. But the central problem that occurred at this early stage in the evolution of gay theatre was mainly caused by the concurrent need for gay activism in such an approach to cultural production. So, rather than formulate a more diverse and experimental base from which gay performance could develop and evolve in a more queer direction, a more internally-policed and politically accountable methodology was adopted.

Furthermore, the newly established occidental lesbian and gay politics of the post-Stonewall era, was viewed by many as a chaotic climate of external masquerades of homogenized utopian unity, that really concealed underlying internal conflicts in agenda and ideology; conflicts that aggressively sought to articulate or impose a necessary gender/sexual separatism. The lesbian movement vociferously condemned the gay men for their apparent misogyny and patriarchal privilege, whilst the gay men responded by condemning the lesbians for (seemingly) being free of actual legal persecution and thus being unable to fully conceive of true oppression. As culturally perceived 'essential' homosexual subject formations, lesbians and gay men were united in terms of their sexuality and its relation to heterocentric dichotomies of power, (as deviant 'other') yet divided in terms of their heteronormative gender status in relation to the same dichotomy (the lesbians as subordinate female 'other'). These gender and power differences also started to

become quite problematic when discussed in relation to their differing approaches to political theatre and performance:

> [i]n particular the conflict between gay men and lesbians proved problematic; women were a minority in the Gay Liberation Front, and they felt that general patterns of male dominance in society were being reproduced within a supposedly radical movement. Even though lesbians and gay men shared a sense of hostility from the dominant heterosexual society, lesbians felt they also had to deal with prejudice against them as women, both from 'straight' society and from many gay men.[9]

Lesbian politics seemed at the time to be irrevocably (and repressively, given feminism's unease with lesbian sexuality) intertwined with the radical separatism of early feminism, and so gay men (in the form of the G.L.F) set themselves the problematic task of defining and promoting (but more importantly constructing) a visible and essential gay community. By promoting an idea of 'sameness', and publicly distancing themselves from those 'problem' members of the gay subculture, the core of gay identity politics was specifically concerned with the 'normalization' of the homosexual subject and the promotion of a strictly policed gay iconography. Gay men were projected as being (essentially) just as 'straight' (ie. 'normal' and 'conservative') as heterosexuals and, therefore, undeserving of such oppression. Less threatening signifying identities and strategies were thus adopted, culturally projected and debated within some of the emerging mainstream gay-male theatre of the time (in comparison, for example, to the more subversive subtexts and paratexts of such playwrights as Tennessee Williams or Mart Crowley, examined in previous chapters).

[9] Wandor, p. 18.

The central turning point for this mainstream theatre comes with the first reports, in 1981, of the disease which later became known as AIDS. The AIDS epidemic ended up making urgent a cultural work of redefinition of the gay individual, of his identity and of his place in the community and American society in general.

Gay Regulations in *The Normal Heart*

The first play by the writer and activist Larry Kramer (1935), *The Normal Heart*, a semiautobiographical play that recounts the attempts of the Gay Men's Health Crisis to pressure the city of New York into responding to the AIDS epidemic, premiered on 21 April 1985 in the Public Theatre in New York, in a production directed by Michael Lindsay-Hogg.[10] The play was a commercial success, not only in America, but all around the world. Not the first production to bring together AIDS and homosexuality, *The Normal Heart* was, however, the first play that introduced it to a larger audience.

The Normal Heart, following a tradition of an agit-prop theatre, constitutes above all a manifesto by Kramer in the first person as gay activist.[11] In the play,

[10] For a detailed account of the historical development from the gay liberation movement to AIDS activism see, for example, Jeffrey Weeks, *Invented Moralities: Sexual Values in an Age of Uncertainty*, (Cambridge: Polity, 1995).

[11] Kramer was born into a wealthy professional family in Bridgeport, Connecticut, on 25 June 1935. He completed a B.A. at Yale in 1957 and served in the army for a year after graduating. In 1958, he began a career in the entertainment industry, working first for the William Morris Agency and then for Columbia Pictures. His first professional writing was the screenplay for the 1969 movie adaptation of D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*, which he also produced and for which he received an Academy Award nomination. Kramer gained prominence in the world of gay writing in 1978, when his novel *Faggots* was published. A scathing satire of the gay circuit in Manhattan and on Fire Island, the novel traces the life and neuroses of Fred Lemish, a middle-aged Jewish gay man looking for love in a world that only wants to have sex. The world of fast-lane gay New York becomes the real subject of the book, and Kramer's narrative focuses on the drug and alcohol abuse, the sado-masochism and the promiscuity that he sees as both typical and reprehensible. The novel met with immediate hostility from reviewers in both the gay and straight press, yet ironically went on to become a best-seller. In 1987, when the novel was reissued, politics and disease had forced many changes in the community Kramer lampooned, and both gay and straight readers were considerably more laudatory of the book. Although *Faggots* marked an important breakthrough novel for gay publishing, Kramer himself will most likely be remembered as an AIDS activist. In 1981, he cofounded Gay Men's Health Crisis in

Kramer points out the government's homophobia concerning the lack of research money. However, he does not only attack the government's response to the epidemic, but the gay community as well, and seeks above all assimilation. In *Reports from the Holocaust: The Story of an Aids Activist*, Kramer writes:

> I am telling you they are killing us and we are letting them! Yes I am screaming like a hysteric[…]. You are going to die and you are going to die very, very soon unless you get up off your fucking tushies and fight back! Unless you do – you will forgive me – you deserve to die […]. AIDS is our holocaust. Tens of thousands of our precious men are dying […]. AIDS is our holocaust and Reagan is our Hitler. New York City is our Auschwitz.[12]

Kramer's radicalism is very much present in *The Normal Heart*. The play is above all an anti-sex message and dismissal of the strides made forward by gay liberators following the Stonewall riots. Ned Weeks, the play's protagonist and Kramer's alter-ego, constantly looks for societal, and therefore heteronormative approval. There is no room for subversion, only for assimilation. In no form are the identities or strategies adopted by Kramer intended to undermine or target mainstream society. The target in *The Normal Heart* is queerness itself.

New York, the first community-based AIDS service organization in America. Disenchanted with what he perceived to be the lethal dangers of an uncontrollable AIDS bureaucracy, he founded AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) in 1988, which became and remains one of the most powerful direct action political groups in America. Kramer then wrote *The Normal Heart* in 1986. Kramer's most recent writings have been direct political polemics, all of which have been gathered in *Reports from the Holocaust: The Making of an AIDS Activist* (1989). Although a full-length examination of Kramer's life and work is inexistent, for more see, for example, Billy J. Harbin, Kim Marra, and Robert A. Schanke, 'The Gay & Lesbian Theatrical Legacy: A Biographical Dictionary of Major Figures in American Stage History in the Pre-Stonewall Era', (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), pp. 240-43, Emmanuel S. Nelson, 'Contemporary Gay American Poets and Playwrights: An a-to-Z Guide', (Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 2003), pp. 236-45, and Jackson R. Bryer and Mary C. Hartig, 'The Facts on File Companion to American Drama', (New York: Facts On File, 2010), pp. 295-96.

[12] Larry Kramer, 'Introduction', in *The Normal Heart*, (London: Nick Hern Books, 1993), pp. iv-vii (p. v).

The play takes place between July 1981 and May 1984, corresponding each one of the 16 scenes – divided in two acts – to a specific month, respecting a chronological order. Based in real facts and people, Kramer constructs his alter-ego in Ned Weeks, who, as Kramer himself, takes on a pedagogical mission inside the gay community as a political activist, trying to obtain the media attention and the support of the New York mayor in the prevention of the disease. In 1992, Kramer publishes *The Destiny of Me*, a continuation of *Normal Heart*. Kramer states in the introduction to *The Normal Heart* his intention to write this play as part of a trilogy narrating his life and times.[13] However, so far, *The Destiny of Me* is Kramer's last play of the trilogy.

Ned Weeks' discourse in the play, just like Kramer's, to the gay community, is not subtle. Ned reacts against a gay culture he considers promiscuous, defending the domestication of gay individual sexuality, according to heteronormative monogamous parameters, going as far as to assert that gay individuals brought the disease on themselves by not respecting this model.

In the original New York production of the play, little furniture was on stage and assumed different functions throughout the play. None of the objects present on stage were meant to distract the spectator from its most important element: the walls that delimitated the stage, written with facts and numbers on AIDS-related deaths. This was also respected in following productions. One of these inscriptions was changed every night, when a new statistic was updated: the total number of victims

[13] Ibid. p. vii. Between these two parts of Kramer's trilogy project, Kramer writes two other plays that also focus on AIDS: *Just Say No* (1988) and *Unnatural Acts* (1990), these last one based on the reports gathered in the anthology *Reports from the Holocaust*. All these three plays were performed in New York. For more about these texts, see John M. Clum, *Still Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama*, (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2000), pp. 66-67 and 233-36.

of the epidemic followed by the expression 'AND COUNTING.'[14] The inscriptions on the walls of the stage reinforce the Brechtian objective of *The Normal Heart*: to engage the spectator and force him to confront the different elements that are presented on stage. *The Normal Heart* reveals a concern that according to Alan Sinfield is prominent in post-AIDS gay theatre: to prove the authenticity of the facts and therefore prove the authenticity of the emotions.[15] Sinfield reads this theatre as a model which brings together the political factor and catharsis, alerting however – in a reading of Bertolt Brecht formulations – that this union may be a perverse one: the over-identification of the spectator with the character and with the presented facts, instead of motivating a critical action against the ruling system, may lead to the comodification of the individual in that same system, as it reveals to the spectator the exact place he occupies.[16]

The Normal Heart focuses on Ned Weeks and on his circle of gay friends and colleagues, most of them closeted. Only two main characters of the play are not gay: Ben Weeks, Ned's brother, and Dr Emma Brookner, a pioneering doctor in the fight and prevention of AIDS. Drawing from his own experiences, Kramer depicts Ned's fights following the formation of an organization that is strikingly similar to Gay Men's Health Crisis. There is a parallel story told within the play as well: that of the beginning, middle, and end of Ned's relationship with his sick lover, Felix.

Weeks is selfish, difficult, and boorish. Even the scenes of tenderness between him and his lover Felix are complicated with Ned's constant need to lecture:

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[14] Larry Kramer, *The Normal Heart*, (London: Nick Hern Books, 1993), pp. xi-xiii. Subsequent references to Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* will be placed within parentheses in the text and will be to this edition, unless stated otherwise.

[15] Alan Sinfield, *Out on Stage: Lesbian and Gay Theatre in the Twentieth Century*, (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 321.

[16] Ibid. p. 321.

> (*Ned comes over to Felix and sits beside him. Then he leans over and kisses him. The kiss becomes quite intense. Then Ned breaks away, jumps up, and begins to walk around nervously.*)
> NED: The American Jews knew exactly what was happening, but everything was downplayed and stifled. Can you imagine how effective it would have been if every Jew in America had marched on Washington? Proudly! Who says I want a lover? Huh!? I mean, why doesn't anybody believe me when I say I do not want a lover? (19).

Even when Felix becomes ill, Ned does not change. He stays with his lover Felix, and continues to care for him, but he refuses to let Felix take the experimental AIDS drug, AZT. When Felix starts surrender to the disease, Ned does not provide comfort and soft words but instead rages at his dying lover:

> You can't eat the food? Don't eat the food. Take your poison. I don't care. You can't get up off the floor—fine, stay there. I don't care. Fish— fish is good for you; we don't want any of that, do we? (*Item by item, he throws the food on the floor.*) No green salad. No broccoli; we don't want any of that, no, sir. […] You want to die Felix? Die! (*Ned retreats to a far corner. After a moment Felix crawls…with extreme effort makes his across to Ned. They fall into each other's arms.*) Felix, please don't leave me. (67-68)

The obnoxious ranting character of Ned Weeks and the blunt abrasive political beliefs of Larry Kramer became indistinguishable for many spectators and critics.

The first scene of *The Normal Heart* takes place in the waiting room and inside Emma's office, where at the beginning of the play, Craig and David are diagnosed with the virus. Craig is one of Ned's ex-lovers. Ned, who is present in the

office to interview Emma, while in a conversation with Mickey, Craig's friend, criticizes the gay lifestyle, referring to the gay community in his speech as the 'others', placing himself apart from this same community: 'You guys have never exactly stood for happily married life.' (4). The conversation that follows between Ned and Emma while she also examines him, presents the political discourse argued in the play, as well as the stage of the research conducted so far on the disease and the medical and scientific support the patients had been receiving. This kind of strictly documental dialogue is present all throughout the play. The speech of these characters, particularly Ned's, does not allow much room for subtext. The approaches are very direct and frequently simply reaffirm the obvious, which sometimes withdraws a more human dimension from Ned.

In scene eleven, Ned, Mickey, Bruce and Tommy create G.M.H.C. All members of the organization are successful, white, straight-acting gay men. Bruce is elected president as he is the most respected and discreet element of the group. The issue of homogeneity, that became one of the most debated in the gay liberation movement, is raised by Mickey, but barely discussed: 'I'm worried this organization might only attract white bread and middle class. We need Blacks. […] how do you feel about Lesbians?' (21) Sinfield argues precisely that all the characters in *The Normal Heart* belong to a white educated urban middle class, which does not have a great tradition in political dissidence, not expecting the government to work against them.[17] However, these characters do not even go up against any political power, but solely search to blame a person or a non-governmental institution and to be assimilated by mainstream society.

[17] Ibid. p. 323.

Ned, in particular, looks incessantly for acceptance: the mayor's acceptance, *The New York Times*' acceptance, and mainly his brother Ben's acceptance. Ned wants Ben to support his organization and to put his name on the honorary members of the organization, demonstrating his wish to be accepted within heteronormativity. As Peter F. Cohen argues:

> Ben functions as the on-stage representative of the white, middle-class heterosexuals for whom *The Normal Heart* was written – the only heterosexual male in a play filled with dying gay men. As such, he is granted representative powers: on behalf of straight, middle-class America, Ben is afforded the symbolic power to grant or deny gay men such as Ned equal access to the power a privileges of straight men like himself.[18]

Moreover, Ben works as Ned's extension, in ideological terms. Despite being heterosexual, Ben shares the same vision of homosexuality as Ned: 'I open magazines and I see pictures of you guys in leather and chains and whips and black masks, […] and I say to myself, "This isn't Ned." […] You guys have a dreadful image problem.' (30). Despite being one of Ben's lines, this could be easily Ned's.

From its formation, Ned is a dissenting voice within the organization that he has helped to form. In scene five, when the organization is created, Mickey reacts to the content of a flyer that Ned wants to distribute, which appeals to gay individuals to abstain from sex. Bruce supports Mickey in his criticism of Ned: 'But we can't tell people how to live their lives!' (22). Ned replies: 'You know, Mickey, all we've created is generations of guys who can't deal with each other as anything but erections.' (23). Ned's radicalism is always opposed to another character's more

[18] Peter F. Cohen, *Love and Anger: Essays on Aids, Activism, and Politics*, (London and New York: Haworth Press, 1998), p. 81.

subversive position: ‘I’ve spent fifteen years of my life fighting for our right to be free and make love whenever, wherever... And you are telling me that all those years of what being gay stood for is wrong... and I’m a murderer. We have been oppressed! Don’t you remember how it was?’ (57). Nevertheless, at the end of the play, Ned’s assimilative discourse wins.

After resigning from G.M.H.C., Ned does not hide the fact he is disappointed, saying that he belongs to a culture constituted by names as Cole Porter, Herman Melville, Garcia Lorca, Alexander, the Great, Proust, James Baldwin, Tennessee Williams, Tchaikovsky, among others, and that gay individuals will only be proud of who they are, and recognized by mainstream society, from the moment that take into account their cultural and historical inheritance, and not just their sexual inheritance (65-66). Once again, this long list works as a plea for gay men to stop their promiscuous behaviour. There is certainly more to gay liberation than sex, however, Ned’s argument does not take into account that it is through sex and the affirmation of different sexualities that heteronormative reductions such as ‘abnormal’ can be eradicated.

The end of the play focuses on Ned and Felix’s relationship. Despite this relation and Felix’s disease assuming a parallel and secondary place in the play, close to the end, this becomes a central plotline. In the last scene of the play, before Felix’s death, Felix marries Ned, in a ceremony improvized by Emma.

Felix, like Hank in *The Boys in the Band*, comes from a heterosexual relationship, and assumes with normality his homosexuality, expect for not coming out. However, Felix in *The Normal Heart* does not allow for a queer deconstruction as Hank in *The Boys in the Band.* In Felix’s construction, gender is a fluid choice which shifts and changes in different contexts and at different times, but with this

final wedding, he falls within heteronormativity again. Kramer offers in Ned and Felix's marriage the traditional ending of the conventional narratives that represents heterosexual love, through the approving gaze of the two heterosexual characters of the play, Ben and Emma.[19] Thus, the overall strategy of the play is to be accepted and assimilated by mainstream society: '[f]or Kramer, a gay love story was viewed as a strategic way to tap the sympathies of a heterosexual audience. Presented with a picture of gay men finding and losing love "just like everyone else", heterosexuals would be moved to do something about the epidemic.'[20]

Furthermore, Felix's death is also in line with the political discourse of the play: Felix must die in name of the promiscuous urban gay world. There is no room for a celebration of the past of gay liberation. By bringing together death and promiscuity, Kramer is reaffirming the main statement of the play: gay men are doomed to loneliness unless they stop being promiscuous. In this play, which represents AIDS as a moral disease, the cure is a return to what Julia Kristeva names 'the Law of the Father', a restoration of patriarchy. The gay community must be eradicated of its problem, which is sexual promiscuity, and the heterosexist order must be reinstated.[21]

The play's final lines are of reconciliation between the two brothers. In the end, Ned loses his lover but gains the approval of his brother, the representative of heteronormativity. Larry Kramer does not present a solution for what obsesses him, gives no room to counter the promiscuity he so much blames, only presenting a

[19] Román, p. 63.
[20] Cohen, p. 80.
[21] Julia Kristeva, *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 85.

destructive and exploitive portrait of homosexuality. [22] In *The Normal Heart*, AIDS is the gay condemnation, with no room for a queer future.

Gay/Queer Intersections in *Angels in America*

The nineties, for many cultural commentators, witnessed quite a 'revolution' in the emergence of openly gay theatre within the mainstream. American stages became a privileged space for gay representations in an attempt to universalize homosexual subjectivities by representing them, not as representatives of 'perversity', but rather as representatives of 'normality.'[23] *Angels in America Part One: Millennium Approaches* (1992) and *Part Two: Perestroika* (1993) by Tony Kushner (1956) were widely hailed as forms of epic theatre that finally brought a specifically gay voice to *a fin de siècle* mainstream.[24] After a first presentation in Los

[22] Clum, p. 64.

[23] David Savran, *Taking It Like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism and Contemporary American Culture*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 278.

[24] Kushner was born into a Jewish family in New York City on 16 July 1956, but grew up in Lake Charles, Louisiana. Although he recognized his homosexuality at a very young age, he did not come out until early adulthood. He left Louisiana to attend Columbia University as an undergraduate and stayed in Manhattan to study theatre directing at New York University. In addition to the two-play cycle *Angels in America*, Kushner is the author of three children's plays; of adaptations of works by Corneille, Brecht, Ansky, and Goethe; and of the original dramas *A Bright Room Called Day* (1987), *Slavs!* (1994), which is included in a collection of essays, *Thinking about the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness* (1995), and *Hydriotaphia or The Death of Doctor Browne* (1999). Kushner acknowledges the creative influence of literary figures such as Herman Melville, Bertolt Brecht, and Walter Benjamin. Melville's influence is manifest in the breadth and poetry of *Angels in America*. Brecht's insistence on socially conscious, proletarian drama is evident in Kushner's depictions of normal people in politically charged crises, and Benjamin's mysticism and apocalypticism inform Kushner's sense of history as wreckage and his alertness to historical turning points. Like Goethe and Brecht, Kushner is committed to a theatre of ideas. Kushner's plays frequently use startling juxtapositions to provoke analysis and thought. *A Bright Room Called Day*, for instance, takes place in the declining Weimar Republic of the 1930s. However, the action is interrupted periodically by the political, social, and apocalyptic commentary of a young, punk, Jewish woman living in Reagan-era New York. This device explicitly invites us to compare Adolph Hitler and Ronald Reagan. *Slavs!* is set in the last decade before the fall of the Soviet Union, the action taking place prior to and after the Chernobyl nuclear reactor accident. Its central characters are two women, a paediatrician and a security guard, whose love affair and its collapse is paralleled by that of the Soviet civil infrastructure and political organization. Kushner's most recent dramatic project is a trilogy concerned with money. The first instalment is entitled *Henry Box Brown*, which dramatizes an African-American slave's escape from the South in a packing box. By the late 1990s, by virtue of the extraordinary theatrical and critical success of *Angels in America*, which garnered him a Pulitzer Prize and two Tony Awards (among other honours), Kushner had become a celebrity spokesman for gay politics and AIDS

Angeles, still while a work in progress, *Angels in America – A Gay Fantasia on National Themes. Part One: Millennium Approaches*, had its premiere at the Eureka Theatre in San Francisco in May 1991. *Angels in America – A Gay Fantasia on National Themes. Part Two: Perestroika*, premiered in November of the following year, in the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. Alan Sinfield agues that *Angels* is probably the first American play since *A Streetcar Named Desire* to attain the position of American classic and in which several scholars were able to find references to Sophocles, Brecht or Shakespeare, and also references to plays as diverse as *Torch Song Trilogy* (1979) by Harvey Fierstein,[25] *Death of a Salesman* (1949) by Arthur Miller, and *The Boys in the Band* by Mart Crowley.[26]

Indeed, Kushner's award-winning 'gay fantasia on national themes' is quite a notable accomplishment, in that it succeeds in re-introducing a deeply politicized approach to theatre to a normally resistant and de-politicized 'audience' and mainstream theatrical culture.[27] However, his texts achieve this by traditionally integrating both implicit and explicit didacticism with an inherently emotive sentimentality, that merely returns the work to the conventions of political fringe theatre and the affirmative, unproblematic representation of gay sexuality (though

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activism. For a more detailed examination of Kushner's work and life, see for example, James Fisher, *Understanding Tony Kushner*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2008).

[25] *Torch Song Trilogy* by Harvey Fierstein is one of the most important examples of gay theatre, being one of the greatest successes among the public on Broadway. The complete trilogy was presented for the first time at The Glines in a stage direction by Peter Pope. The three plays of the trilogy ('The International Stud', 'Fugue in a Nursery' and 'Widows and Children First!') had been staged before on La Mama, E.T.C. of New York, between 1978 and 1979. The production at The Glines included the participation of Fierstein himself in the role of Arnold, and Mathew Broderick as David. These were also the same actors who later participated on the film version by Paul Bogart in 1988.

[26] Sinfield, pp. 205-06.

[27] In early 2004, a six hour television miniseries of *Angels in America* adapted by Kushner, appeared, produced by US wunderkind subscription cable channel, HBO, which, currently at least, has a good reputation for producing gay narratives. The film cost $65,000,000 to produce, 2 and featured flashy special effects, a stellar cast, and a rather glossy visual style. Robert Altman was originally slated to direct a film version of Kushner's play. The role was then passed to the director of camp classics *Muriel's Wedding* and *My Best Friend's Wedding*, P. J. Hogan. Finally, however, *Birdcage* director Mike Nichols took over the project for the HBO Special.

rather consistently aligned with AIDS). *Angels in America* as a polemical text raises some extremely important questions, but fails to truly deal with them in any focused or analytical way, rather consuming them in an overly sentimental triviality, and projecting a spectacle of AIDS and homosexuality which is quite insidiously problematic in that the 'plague' is presented as a rather 'righteous' phenomenon that ennobles the good and punishes the bad.

In the early moments of the play, two characters are presented to us, both of whom have discovered that they have been infected by AIDS, Prior Walter and Roy Cohn. Like in *The Normal Heart*, *Angels in America* is constructed through the opposition of the gay individuals, victims of AIDS and a closed and oppressing heteronormative political system. As the narrative unfolds, Prior Walter's experience of the disease is explored with typically conventional ideas of 'strength', 'compassion' and 'courage' that align him quite positively with his role as ideal gay citizen. As a symbol of the essential contemporary gay identity, he represents the utopic face of modern homosexuality that gay patriarchy is so keen to promote. Kushner represents in *Angels* the intersection of individual journeys, in a place where a reciprocal complicity is constructed, and an ideal gay community is constructed:

> [l]ove and hope amid the tragic, *Perestroika* instructs, structure and maintain community. In *Perestroika*, it is a sense of community which provides the foundation for 'more life.' The reproductive dictums of heteronormativity are rejected for a queer politics invested in sustaining life.[28]

In stark contrast, however, the character of Roy Cohn is represented as an embittered and unpleasant person whose death from the disease is painful, degrading

[28] Román, p. 213.

and, therefore, a stereotypically fitting end to such a 'negative' gay character. This negativity, of course, is conveyed as a direct result of Cohn's role as the typically repressed and internally confused homophobe, who denies the imposition of a gay identity in spite of the fact that he engages in sex acts with other men. His crime then, is the rejection of his 'natural' identity and membership of the community, which is thus punished by self-loathing, sociopathology and a painful death. The play thus ironically approaches AIDS in a similar vein to the anti-gay religious right, who interpret the disease as a punishment to those who 'wickedly' refuse to conform to a certain social order, lifestyle and identity (similar to Larry Kramer's radicalism in *The Normal Heart*). Cohn sees homosexual identity as valueless and ineffective and he is punished accordingly, whereas Prior Walter's acceptance and openness towards his identity 'saves' him from such a fate, since in the final moments of the narrative he appears beside the play's prophetic Angel, empowered by his noble battle against AIDS and the support of his community. Such gay moralist ideology, though effective in bringing issues regarding AIDS and homosexuality to the mainstream, also tends to promote a sanitized and idealist idea of gay sexuality that repudiates any idea of non-conformity to such identities or ideologies, and consequently fails to problematize or challenge its heterocentric audience in any way. The promise of controversy that the play originally envisaged is hence undermined by spectacle and sentiment, which not only fails to explore its issues in any affective way but also promotes a mythology of homosexuality that is consistently intertwined with disease and punishment.

However, some critics have found a distinctively queer value in Kushner's epic, in that it not only explores the more traditional 'minoritising' polemics of the gay community (as evidenced by its use of stereotypically camp cultural references,

iconography and excessive spectacle), but also exhibits evidence of a more subtle interest in new configurations of sexuality. Even though AIDS is quite specifically (and stereotypically) a 'gay disease' in the play, as a 'Gay Fantasia on National Themes' it also uniquely locates such typically gay concerns and identities within the heart of mainstream culture and society. Therefore, Kushner's representation of the ideal gay protagonist is placed at the heart of normative society, sharing common concerns and objectives with that of its straight counterpart, rather than as an exclusive and marginalized 'other'; in fact *Angels In America Part Two: Perestroika* even concludes with a utopian vision of the future of the 'gay citizen.' The play hence foregrounds and re-locates gay issues to the transnational and existentialist sphere, and consciously projects a political and theoretical consciousness of the radical potential of fluid configurations and harmonious identities. As David Savran states in a recent interview with Kushner: '[l]ike Queer Nation, *Angels in America* aims to subvert the distinction between the personal and the political, to refuse to be closeted, to undermine the category of the "normal", and to question the fixedness and stability of every sexual identity.'[29]

Angels opened in the same year that Queer Nation was formed, and Kushner project seems to go in the same direction as the queer politics defended by the organization:

> [h]is project, as rendered in the cultural practices of the theatre, demands that as gay men we persevere in locating and claiming our agency in the constructions of our histories. Kushner insists that we recognize that the procedures of our lives in response to AIDS not only matter (the matter of traditional AIDS plays) but that

[29] David Savran quoted in P. Brask, 'Essays on Kushner's *Angels*', (Winnipeg: Blizzard Publishing, 1995), (p. 132).

> these procedures also hold insight and concern into the current U.S. political landscape.[30]

David Román concludes his argument examining the play's title – *A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* – and questioning how the play directs the reader to a inquiring of the concept of official history. According to Román, *Angels* proposes the integration within official history of the lives of gay individuals who are also part of the nation, bringing to the mainstream two different histories until then separated.[31]

Most critics argue that the play's queer value is represented through the experiences of this group of characters, who have different racial, sexual and religious backgrounds, and live together through AIDS and Reaganism. Savran defines *Angels* as a nationalistic project and an anti-homophobic project, seeking to demonstrate the central role of the gay subject on the political and cultural stage, and in the construction of a national identity. To the author, *Angels* does not represent an individual journey, but a multicultural collective journey: the way each individual, with their own cultural and sexual particularities, represents a constant negotiation with all the elements that constitute a nation, and thus, *Angels* not only represents how the ideology of a nation constructs the individual, but of how this same individual may constitute a factor of radical change in that same ideology. [32] Steven Kruger, in his article 'Identity and Conversion in *Angels in America*' argues through his examination of the titles that the play is a project that looks for an intervention in American politics from an identity specific position that to a certain extent depends

[30] Román, p. 204.
[31] Ibid. p. 205.
[32] Savran, p. 241.

on fantasy.[33] Christopher Bigsby adds that '[f]antasy becomes not merely a style but a mode of being. Variety, heterogeneity, unpredictability, transformations, pluralisms, ambiguities, anarchy gestures are contrasted with the arbitrary codes, legalism, fixities of a society which works by exclusion.'[34]

Indeed, the gay characters in the play represent different extremes of masculinity and femininity, demonstrating the extent to which a gay character acts either masculine or feminine, and simultaneously deconstructs traditional gender dichotomies. However, Kushner's representation of gender on a continuum in *Angels* insinuates that the closer a gay character is to the feminine end of the continuum, the more comfortable he is with his homosexuality. Kushner's equation of femininity and power in the play refutes cultural assumptions of masculine power. For Kushner's gay characters, femininity manifests comfort with one's homosexuality simply because contemporary associations with homosexuality equate gay men with effeminate behaviour, traditionally rendering them powerless because their use of feminine performatives indicates adherence to the culturally prescribed behaviour associated with the marginalized female sex. Kushner creates the continuum to distinguish the most feminine gay character (Belize) from the most masculine gay characters (Roy Cohn and Joe Pit) to illustrate a shift in power. Thus, in *Angels in America*, Kushner reverses the heteronormative hierarchy, empowering femininity and disempowering masculinity.

Angels is certainly both didactic and revolutionary, giving voice to a marginalized group in the midst of a crisis, portraying the oppressed status of gay men in society, caused primarily by hegemonic masculinity, simultaneously allowing

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[33] Steven F. Kruger, 'Identity and Conversion in *Angels in America*', in *Approaching the Millennium - Essays on "Angels in America"*, ed. by Deborah Geis and Steven F. Kruger (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), pp. 151-69 (p. 151).

[34] C. W. E. Bigsby, *Modern American Drama 1945-1990*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000 [1992]), p. 421.

the audience to understand oppressive constructs and subsequently provoke social change. In his essay on political theatre, Tony Kushner writes:

> [a]ssimilation is dangerous if we attempt to blend in with an order that's out to destroy us. Identifying oneself as a pariah, as Other, if that's what we are, is an important political act. We take the right and privilege of definition away from the oppressor, we assume the power of naming ourselves.[35]

However, through the identification of 'oneself as a pariah' in *Angels*, Tony Kushner excludes masculine closeted gay men, thus undermining the queer enterprise he initially takes in the play. Kushner's queer impetus in *Angels* is his own trap.

Similarly to queer theory, *Angels in America* explores notions of sexuality and identity, and as Roy Cohn's explosive attitude towards sexual identity illustrates, subjectivity and the social construction of sexual identity are far from as essentially fixed as commonly perceived. Even the play's metaphorical Angel is 'Hermaphroditically equipped' with numerous transgender sexual organs. However, despite the play's queer ideological impetus to remake America, there is a general ambivalence, a lack of clarity in the specifics of any real strategy of subversion, and most importantly, in the plays' inclusiveness, particular identities are excluded to attain its objective.

Gay Revival in *Love! Valour! Compassion!*

The commercial success of such a classical epic as *Angels in America* did in one sense pave the way for a number of other specifically gay-themed plays to have

[35] Tony Kushner, 'Notes About Political Theater', *Kenyon Review* 19 (1997), 26.

access to the mainstream, namely Terrence McNally's (1939) *Love! Valour! Compassion!* (1995).

Much of the theatre produced about AIDS in the eighties was moved by a 'therapeutic orientation', where frequently the five stages of trauma management are identifiable: 'denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance.'[36] Due to a climate of fear, trauma and denial, in relation to the epidemic, AIDS was only represented in mainstream theatre a few years following the first diagnosis of the disease, and normally its association to homosexuality was not very positive (as examined, for example, in Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart*).[37] According to David Román, 1987 was a year of great change in the representation of homosexuality and AIDS on stage, when camp returned to gay theatre.[38]

Camp's resurrection in American theatre resulted from its ironic exuberance and provocation, as employed during the pre-Stonewall period, and Terrence McNally was one of its main promoters.[39] McNally's work makes constant camp

[36] Sinfield, p. 318.
[37] Román, p. 10.
[38] Ibid. p. 88.
[39] McNally was born on 3 November 3 1939 in St. Petersburg, Florida. He was raised in Corpus Christi, Texas. He enrolled at Columbia University, where he was awarded a degree in English in 1960. McNally spent time after graduation in Mexico, where he completed a one-act play which he submitted to the Actors Studio in New York for production. Although the play was ultimately rejected by the acting school, the Studio was impressed with the script, and offered McNally a job as stage manager. As a young man, McNally became a protégé and lover of playwright Edward Albee. Later he became involved with attorney and Broadway producer Tom Kirdahy. The couple entered into a civil union in Vermont in 2001. In April 2010, they were married in Washington, D. C. He achieved a measure of popular success with *The Ritz* (1974), a transgressive farce set in a gay bathhouse; *Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune* (1987), which was unfortunately gutted to make a cinematic star-vehicle for Al Pacino and Michelle Pfeiffer; and with the books for the musicals *The Rink* (1984), *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1993), and *Ragtime* (1996). McNally's drive to dramatize the ways by which people are able eventually to accept difference explains the importance of India in his personal mythology, Hinduism representing the acceptance of all that is human. Thus, for McNally, the most important thing that the arts, particularly theatre and opera, can do is to break down the walls that divide people and widen the shared human breathing space. McNally's oeuvre is a metacommentary upon the power of theatre to confront prejudice, break down resistance, and effect reconciliation. But it is in a quartet of plays that respond to the AIDS epidemic – *The Lisbon Traviata* (1985, rev. 1989); *Lips Together, Teeth Apart* (1991); *A Perfect Ganesh* (1993); and *Love! Valour! Compassion!* (1994), as well as in the Emmy-award-winning *Andre's Mother* (1988, televised 1990) – that McNally orchestrates his dominant theme of the difficulty of connection between people and of the corresponding need for love, bravery, and compassion in human relationships. For a detailed examination of McNally's life and work, see, for

references to American musicals, names camp divas, and usually one of his main characters is a show queen.[40] McNally's most commercially successful play was *Love! Valour! Compassion!*. The play first opened on the Off-Broadway Manhattan Theatre Club on 1 of November 1984, in a stage direction by Joe Mantello. Later this same production was transferred to Broadway to the Walter Kerr Theatre on 20 January 20 1995.[41]

Love! Valour! Compassion! is set in the mid-nineties at a Dutchess County Lakeside house owned by a gay choreographer, Gregory Mitchell, who invites a group of friends for relaxing weekends during which the characters struggle with personal relationships, the spectre of AIDS, and other vicissitudes of life: '[t]hey swim, play tennis, make meals, listen to serenade piano songs, sunbathe nude, lament about AIDS and, finally, dance together to Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* in drag as a rehearsal for a charity performance.'[42] The characters include two English brothers, John and James, a Broadway musical fanatic, Buzz, and assorted others, including a young Latino who threatens Gregory's longtime relationship with a young blind man, Bobby.

The play won praise for its humanistic examination of gay life seen through the experiences of a diverse group of gay friends. However, despite the play's queer impetus in representing diversity and fluidity, it works more as an update of Mart Crowley's *The Boys in the Band* in a time of gay liberation despite the AIDS threat.

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example, Toby Silverman Zinman, *Terence Mcnally: A Casebook*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1997).

[40] Inside the gay community, a show queen is the name given to a gay man who is very passionate about musical theatre. For more, see, for example, John M. Clum, *Something for the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture*, (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1999).

[41] The film adaptation of the play was also directed by Joe Mantello in 1997 with the original cast of the Broadway production, expect Nathan Lane (who portrayed Buzz), who was replaced by Jason Alexander.

[42] Alfonso Ceballos Muñoz, 'Gay Men Only, Please! The 'Performance' of Gay Identity in Terrence Mcnally's *Love! Valour! Compassion!*', *Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos,* 12 (2007), 40.

Love! Valour! Compassion!'s main intent, in McNally's words, is 'to tell everyone else who we are when they aren't around.'[43] With this objective, McNally takes the gay background and way of life totally for granted in the play and uses it to tell a story which happens to be gay. McNally's succeeds in his objective, but forgets, however, to include an entire spectrum of identities in the very privileged group of the play. The play does not intend in any way to problematize racial, gendered or class-based norms.

AIDS is a theme present in the play, but does not lead the narrative. In fact, McNally tends to isolate the theme: both HIV-positive characters of the play, Buzz and James, are the only two characters not in a relationship and at the end of the second act they fall in love. Thus, even with the eminent menace of AIDS, McNally does not let it threaten his idealized depiction of gay life. In addition, McNally undermines the stigma surrounding AIDS through Buzz's campiness, the show queen of *Love! Valour! Compassion!*.

During the 1970s, following the Stonewall riots, with gay culture's greater visibility, camp, as a group of reading codes shared by gay individuals and which allowed them a dissident reading of cultural productions, was appropriated by mainstream culture and consequently lost its political strength.[44] John M. Clum argues that camp's privileged space of expression was musical theatre, and that it is especially visible in musical theatre produced between the end of the First World War until the beginning of the 1970s.[45] In *Love! Valour! Compassion!*, Buzz represents the return to the campiness of the musical theatre. However, Buzz's camp in the play does not have any political strength, as McNally is only committed to its

[43] Terrence McNally, 'Some Thoughts', in *Love! Valour! Compassion! And a Perfect Ganesh: Two Plays*, (New York: Plume, 1995 [1994]), pp. ix-xii (p. xii).
[44] Clum, p. 8.
[45] Ibid. p. 1.

aesthetic and humorous side: 'I've got everyone in Lycra. Lots and Lots or Lycra. I'm entering my Lycra period.' [46]

Ramon, a young Puerto Rican in *Love! Valour! Compassion!*, is starting a career as a dancer, his great ambition, which he accomplishes in the end of the play, when he becomes one of the dancers in a show choreographed by Gregory Mitchell, his host. Ramon is the object of desire – like Cowboy in *The Boys in the Band* – of all the remaining characters of the play. Roman is conscious how attractive he is: he frequently walks around naked in front of the remaining characters. Ramon is an oversexualized fetish object:

> The MEN are singing "In the Good Old Summertime." As they move apart, they reveal RAMÓN sprawled naked on an old-fashioned wooden float at a distance offshore. One by one, they stop singing, turn around, and take a long look back at RAMÓN splayed on the raft. Even BOBBY. (65)

Ramon is the personification of the idealized convention of gay men.[47] Only Bobby, Gregory's boyfriend and assistant, has the same age as Ramon, who is in his twenties. Bobby, however, despite the implication in the play that he is also very attractive and has angelical looks (20), is blind, which places him not as object of

[46] Terrence McNally, '"Love! Valour! Compassion!"', in *Love! Valour! Compassion! And a Perfect Ganesh: Two Plays*, (New York: Plume, 1995 [1994]), (p. 29). Subsequent references to Terrence McNally's *Love! Valour! Compassion!* will be placed within parentheses in the text and will be to this edition, unless stated otherwise.

[47] The queer potential of Ramon's body in *Love! Valour! Compassion!* is in the context of queer politics not fully explored. Queer politics resulted directly from gay activism connected to the fight of AIDS. Being queer, as well as being HIV-positive, signified the disruption of a series of social categories, such as sexual, racial and of gender. Any subject, from the moment he carries the virus, is a victim of stigmatisation by the 'normalizing' moral, political and even clinical discourses. The queer response to this was the representation of a queer alternative to a 'gay body': 'A queer body is a body whose plasticity, use, and presentation are controlled by its inhabitant – not responding exaggeratedly to the cultural and commercial styles of some moral, respectable majority. If the 'gay body' was a body of compensation (for everything it had been denied in adolescence), the 'queer body' is the body of subversion (of all the roles and behaviours it wants to sabotage) (Browning, pp. 71-72). This, however, is not the body that McNally's represents.

desire, but as someone who needs continuous attention from the others. Eventually, Bobby and Ramon develop a sexual relationship.

In this play, McNally only uses the best of gay culture: young, white, fit, attractive gay men, WASP urban professionals, who can live a comfortable live in the time of AIDS. The play undermines heteronormativity through gay pride and assertiveness of the characters homosexuality, but in a very reductive approach, not taking into account an entire spectrum of diverse identities. If *Angels in America* got trapped in its attempt of inclusiveness, *Love! Valour! Compassion!* does not even attempt to be inclusive, but instead very selective. Thus, Terrence McNally's *Love! Valour! Compassion!* is little more than an updating of Mart Crowley's *The Boys in the Band*, presenting a group of gay friends adding fears of AIDS to negotiate their relationships. Alfonso Ceballos Muñoz argues that both *The Boys in the Band* and *Love! Valour! Compassion!* share obvious similarities, but that there are as many similarities as differences. He argues that '*The Boys in the Band* accentuates a self-hating homosexual group, while *Love! Valour! Compassion!* emphasizes the sense of family and community in a self-assertive mood.'[48] Indeed, but it is through the representation of self-hatred that Crowley brings attention to the destructive effects of the pervasive societal homophobia internalized by pre-Stonewall gay individuals. He then argues that 'whereas the first regrets the group's mediocrity, the second shows a bourgeois gay way of life.'[49] Muñoz is also correct, but it is through the group's mediocrity that *The Boys* offers essential social background to the Stonewall riots. Muñoz's final argument is that the 'the major difference between them is that whereas Crowley's play particularizes a view of gay identity, McNally's idealizes

[48] Muñoz, p. 40.
[49] Ibid. p. 40.

it.'[50] This is indeed the case, but McNally idealizes the gay identity of those who are privileged and can spend three summer weekends at a charming Victorian lakeside country house in upstate New York.

Queer Closets

In the final stages of the pre-millennial nineties, none of the plays here examined has truly epitomized an approach to mainstream theatre that envisaged the radical potency of queer textuality, despite the common designation of these plays as queer theatre by critics: Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* advocates for the restoration of patriarchy through the end of sexual promiscuity within the gay community; Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* neglects in its inclusiveness closeted masculine gay men by empowering femininity and disempowering masculinity; and Terrence McNally's *Love! Valour! Compassion!* portrays a very selective representation of the nineties gay lifestyle, ignoring in its microcosm different racial and sexual identities. Ultimately, none of these mainstream texts applies successfully a queer strategy that thoroughly undermines hetero-patriarchal assumptions in a time of gay liberation. Perhaps, queer theatre's future is in a queer re-reading of past dramatic productions, as Tennessee Williams and Mart Crowley's work, and in a recuperation of past strategies.

[50] Ibid. p. 40.

CHAPTER IV

Queer Performances:

Gay Agenda in David Drake's *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me*

> 'Being healthy and disease-free also began to mean having muscles and a strong, sturdy body. As the 1990s raced on, we were out to prove we were superman despite AIDS.'
>
> - Michelangelo Signorile, *Life Outside*, 1998

> 'The body is not a 'being' but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality.'
>
> - Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 1990

Homonormativity in *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me*

The tension caused by an attempt at invoking a fluidly queer presence in performance is effectively illustrated by David Drake's performance *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me*.[1] In this work, Drake, adopts a specifically autobiographical

[1] Drake, whose real name is David Drakula, was born on 27 June 1962 in Waynesburg, Pennsylvania. After spending his adolescence in Edgewood, a city near Baltimore on the state of Maryland, in his twenties, Drake moved to New York where he participated as an actor in several gay-themed theatrical productions, such as *Pretty Boy* by Greg Mehrtens and produced by Mabou Mines, a production of *The Boys in the Band*, and *A Language of their Own* (1955) by Chey Yew.[1] In addition to occasional participations in television (*Law & Order*), Drake participated as secondary actor in *Longtime Companion* (1990) by Norman René, *Naked in New York* (1994) by Daniel Algrant, and *Philadelphia* (1993) by Jonathan Demme. The playwright-actor-activist also won an Obie Award for best performance for his work in *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me.* In 2000, a film version of *The Night*, directed by Tim Kirkman and starring Drake, was issued. In 2002, Drake's second one-man play, *Son of Dracula*, premiered. Although a full-length examination of Drake's life and work is inexistant, for more see, for example, Emmanuel S. Nelson, 'Contemporary Gay American Poets and Playwrights: An a-to-Z Guide', (Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 2003), pp. 125-29.

approach to the construction and content of his 'queer text', yet not only as a source of narrative explication, but also by presenting his body as an equally important 'queer text' to be read. This corporeal nomination by Drake thus seeks to shift the body of the queer community which incorporates (and homogenizes) subjects, to the individual body of the subject, which incorporates the community. His aim, therefore, is to performatively merge his 'search for identity' with that of the community. Drake's approach to the construction of the work's textuality incorporates a variety of modes of theatricality, from stand-up comedy and cabaret to moments of extreme emotion and nostalgia, in what the performer argues to be the combination of his 'vaudeville instincts' with his political ideology.[2] His aim is to encourage the spectator to witness, participate and thus identify with the consolidation of a united 'communal' response to both the AIDS epidemic, his biographical context, and the formation of a utopic 'queer nation.'

With *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me,* Drake's composite body-text explores the 'stories' that are cartographically 'mapped' into the flesh, in conjunction with the threat of corporeal invasion posed by AIDS. Adopting the form of introspective monologues, he recounts the (subjective) memories that are 'marked' upon a reading of his body, from birth through to sexual awakening, coming out, first love and loss.

The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me premiered on 22 June 1992 at the Perry Street Theater in New York, written and performed by Drake himself, with stage direction by Chuck Brown. Drake's non-mainstream solo was a commercial success, remaining on stage for a year.[3] Drake initially thought about writing a performance text only about the night he saw *The Normal Heart*. On the day of his twenty-second

[2] Heather Joslyn, 'A Kiss Is Still a Kiss', *Baltimore City Paper,* (26 April 2000), p. 2.
[3] Jessica Winter, 'Time Bandits', in *The Village Voice,* (2000), (p. 2).

birthday, 27 July 1985, Drake saw the play *The Normal Heart*, a play he argues represents a rupture in terms of representation of gay subjectivities.[4] However, this initial monologue developed into a triptych on three of Drake's birthdays.

In the first monologue ('Somewhere...') of 'The Birth Triptych', Drake tells of his sixth birthday, when, on the night of the Stonewall riots, he saw a production of *West Side Story* in Baltimore.[5] In the first lines of his performance, Drake evokes in the audience 'communal' memories of the community he incorporates:

> My sixth birthday,
>
> June 27, 1969.
>
> The night the Stonewall Riots
>
> erupted onto the Village streets
>
> in New York City. [6]

In the following monologue ('Out There in the Night'), Drake tells of his first kiss to 'Tim / The Older Man. / Seventeen. / Swim Team Tim. / Debate Team Tim. / Title role in the spring musical *Pippin* Tim.' (5). Drake was seventeen at the time, and they kissed when returning home from seeing *A Chorus Line* also in Baltimore.[7] In the final part of the triptych that gives the name to the performance – 'The Night

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[4] Joslyn, p. 3.

[5] *West Side Story* (1957), a musical by Leonard Bernstein, Stephen Sondheim, Arthur Laurents and Jerome Robbins, has a strong connection to American gay culture. John M. Clum argues that the premiere of *West Side Story* on Broadway was a significant event for the New York gay community of the time and in particular the song 'Somewhere' as it became an anthem of the pre-liberation period. John M. Clum, *Still Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama*, (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2000), p. 200.

[6] David Drake, *The Larry Kramer Kissed Me*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), p. 1. Subsequent references to David Drake's *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me* will be placed within parentheses in the text and will be to this edition, unless stated otherwise.

[7] *A Chorus Line* is a gay-themed musical of 1975, directed by Michael Bennet, with music by Marvin Hamlish, lyrics by Edward Kleban and libretto by James Kirkwood and Nicholas Dante. For more, see John M. Clum, *Still Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama*, (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2000), p. 204.

Larry Kramer Kissed Me' – Drake tells of his twentieth-second birthday, when he saw Kramer's play in New York:

> My 22nd birthday
> June 27, 1985.
> The night I went to see a play –
> one that I'd heard was gay –
> […].
> The night Larry Kramer kissed me
> with his play
> *The Normal Heart.* (13).

In addition to 'The Birthday Triptych', Drake wrote six more monologues. 'Owed to the Village People – Part One' tells of his childhood and the discovery of a gay sensibility. Drake then returns later in the performance to these same topics in 'Owed to the Village People – Part Two.' According to Drake, the most difficult monologue to write was 'A Thousand Points of Light.'[8] In this monologue, Drake reconstructs a vigil in tribute to those who died of AIDS, by lighting candles dispersed on stage that represent each friend he lost to the epidemic. The remaining three monologues – 'Why I go to the Gym', '12-Inch Single', '... and The Way We Were' – are the most problematic in the articulation of a queer discourse and fluid queer presence.

As demonstrated, being observed is the essential 'mise-en-scène' in Drake's *The Night*. This one-man performance makes direct use of the performer's body, of the audience's response to it, of complex self-identification/self-rejection discourses, and most importantly of the binary opposites of male identity: the sissy and the

[8] Joslyn, p. 5.

muscled hunk. Thus, disturbing in the politics of this performance-text – as a vehicle for Act Up and the Queer Nation approaches to gay rights – is the continuing depiction of the protagonist as submissive to the image of the straight man. Repeatedly, the protagonist exposes his desire for and his repudiation of 'Them' (37) – straight men whom the culture tells him are the norm and whom he encounters everywhere. Repeatedly, he creates for himself images of maleness which he compares to 'Them.'

The problematic articulation of a queer discourse in this performance starts in the title itself, by actively naming the performance *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me*, Drake directly places his body-text within the contentious discursive frameworks that surround identity politics and their queer re-appropriation. This directly 'possessive' citation of the discursive pronoun 'Me' re-contextualizes a 'remapping' or embodying the queer body he presents to the audience to the specific autobiography and performative acts of Drake himself. The conflict of signification that such a re-contextualization invokes thus illegitimizes his claim to 'queer' corporeality, since it defines such a corporeality in strictly singular terms:

> Yeah, it was The Night Larry Kramer Kissed *Me*
> That *I* stood dazed,
> single
> in the street. (21-2; my emphasis).

Throughout the performance, the spectators are invited to celebrate the spectacle of the presentation of his body, thus affirmatively politicising their communally aroused (gay) desires within the scopophillic process.

In ‘Why I go to the Gym’, as Drake undresses and exposes his finely toned body which signifies success in the ritual of body building – ‘*Performer should change out of pants and shoes into shorts and sneakers* […].’ (31) – he invites the audience gaze, offering his deviant corporeality for intimate examination and associative contemplation as an highly erotic object, thereby impelling the (predominantly gay male) spectator to confront their own corporeal sensations and subconscious desires in stimulative response to such a union. The reasons for going to the gym are immediately presented:

> Catching glimpses.
> Or staring right out to the guys you’ve wanted since the
> day you
> first feared the sensations they gave you in the junior high
> showers. Only now…
> you can ‘do it.’ (33).
> […]
> Felt that burn.
> MMMmmmm, yeah. That’s why I go to the gym. (36)
> […]
> [to become strong enough to fight off the gay-bashers]
> who are knoc-king-me-down
> on-my-street,
> arm-in-arm-in-packs-that-roam-my-street
> roam-my-street
> roam-my-street
> hun-ting-down-my-kind-of-meat
> That’s why I go to the gym. (38)
> […]
> to-please-the-lov-er-I-don’ t-have-so-I-can-get-one

to-fuck-one

with-a-con-dom

to-pro-tect-one

from-the-stalk-ing

that-is-go-ing

down-on-my-street

a-ttack-ing-dykes-&-fag-gots-who-are-dy-ing

as-they're-ly-ing-down-on-my-street

Yeah

That's why I go to the gym. (39).

In the movement from narcissism to militancy the dual value of a muscled body is presented, but so is the confusion built into this notion of masculinity. In order for gay men to 'have the final laugh' they must have 'that membership card that lets you into.../ The Warrior Room.' (31). The goal is to overcome fear of the straight men, 'Them.' Problematically, the imagery becomes a war cry, but it expresses the same aggression it repudiates. In this monologue, Drake exposes his awareness of the audience and of his union with the spectator – '(*Removing pants, noticing audience*:)' – who, like his fellow athletes in the gym (both straight and gay), is paying attention to 'to the size… of your cock. (32). Thus, the final measure of manhood is also presented on stage as defining of the performer's 'self.'

The dramatic tension of the solo 'climaxes' in the monologue '12 Inch Single' with Drake laboriously inviting men to have sex with him:

I'm a 12 Inch Single:

play me once, flip me over, play me twice.

Hit me. (47).

[…].

Yeah, cruise me.

Choose me.

Abuse me.

Lose me.

Boy, tie me up.

Boy, tie me down. (53)

However, contrary to the more humorous and camp fantasy elements of his autobiographical recollections in other monologues, these performative moments in '12 Inch Single' break with the illusory boundaries of the performance and are transgressively and directly situated in 'the real', as Drake removes the theatrical mask of his performance and reveals the sexual potency of his erotic presence. The 'artifice' of performance is thus problematized by the sudden tension posed by his own sexuality, which transforms the passive role of the spectator. The spatial demarcations of the performance space and the place of the spectator in relation to the performer are hence transgressed. This boundary crossing, however, is hardly unique within the context of an increasingly common avant-garde approach to performance, but it is the very 'nature' of the performer's 'marked' deviant corporeality, its uncompromising visibility, that truly invokes a potential space for the deconstruction and self-reflexivity within the spectator which Artaud and his contemporaries envisaged many decades earlier. It is the embodiment of the deviant, the articulation of perversion and the 'danger' that the unpredictably fluid space which their presence evokes within the performance, where the site of a truly queer performativity can begin to emerge. The (heteronormative) spectator is confronted by an eroticized 'other', and subsequently forced to evaluate their internal physical and emotional responses to such embodiment and sexual spectacle.

However, it is the very ‘nature’ of that ‘other’ within the space that also problematizes any real attempt at a specifically ‘queer’ reading of this corporeal text, since Drake’s invitation, and the ideological minefield invoked by such a fetishization of his body, is a highly contentious and less than effective political path to take in attempting to project a ‘queer body.’ Drake does not engage in sex with anyone in the performance, but the commonly gay male constitution of the audience in such traditionally gay-themed performance spaces (the essentialist community whom he addresses) is quite effectively interpolated within the celebrated physicality of the moment.

Drake, therefore, actively re-inscribes the sexual as a point of affirmation and rejuvenation in a rather sex-radical style. His body is deployed as an object to both arouse and re-affirm gay male desire, thereby repoliticizing that desire in the process and corporeally uniting the performer and spectator in a celebration of an essentialized gay sexuality. Regressively then, Drake’s text can be ineffectively consigned to the context of a more anticipatory performance practice, wherein such transgressive subject matter has come to be expected by an all too knowing and de-sensitized audience. The radical potential of Drake’s body is thus constrained by the internalized regulations of re-presenting the body in public, the limits of performance practice itself and the extremes to which such performance should go.

Despite an unsurprisingly supportive response from the largely gay male audience (an uncritical stance that has become quite problematic in ascertaining the ‘value’ of such work, which tends to bestow iconic status merely because of its content), the rather prescriptive narrative of the spoken text and its consistently exclusive direct address to the privileged white body, merely results in enclosing the

performance and consigning it to the rather limited (from a queer perspective) and essentialist confines of gay (male) performance.

Moreover, Drake's rather insistent invitation, sutures the work firmly to the traditions and signifying practices of a specifically gay performative economy, within which exclusivity, narcissm and phallogocentricism does little to break new ground for a progressive queer performance. Drake's desire to be gay sex-positive thus re-ifies sex as the transcendental signifier of a naturalized identity, and the resulting unchallenged privilege accorded to the spectacle of his white body within a phallogocentric economy, is problematic in relation to his attempt to articulate a unified queer body/nation. This attempt at homogenous unification is counter-productive within such a potentially fluid matrix, whereas a more opaque, collective or fragmented approach to bodily presentation and signification is far more productive. Indeed, the 'queer body' performed and displayed in Drake's *The Nights* is the body of a white gay male HIV-negative individual, and not of a lesbian, transsexual, hermaphrodite, or of any other deviant identities.

At the end of the monologue, the performer finds his fantasmatic lover: he is sadistic (or certainly aggressive) and silent. While chanting 'MMMMMM-/you-/sick.../yeah' five times (56-57), Drake mimes a seduction of and by the lover who pulls a knife and inscribes on Drake's perfectly fabricated torso a deep imprint of his threatening power and potential violence.

The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me ends with '... and The Way We Were', which is set in the millennial New Year's Eve, and pays tribute to American gay activism, from its failures to its achievements. Most importantly in this final monologue, Drake envisages a utopic 'queer nation.' This final monologue is set in Drake's fictional home, where he lives with his partner Bill, following their civil

union. Drake and Bill relationship is constructed within a homonormative model, very similar to its heteronormative counterpart. Drake does not construct a queer model of relationship in his utopic queer future, only assimilating into mainstream society and heteronormativity by creating a homonormative system of power. Even in the film he is going to watch that night with Bill, a remake of *The Way We Were*, the protagonists are Ben Affleck and Matt Damon, who now replace Barbra Streisand and Robert Redford in the love story of the film. Indeed, Drake does not explore the fluidity that a queerness allows him, only envisaging a queer future/nation, where people like him and Bill are 'out, together, walking hand in hand down the streets of New York… Toledo… Portland… Richmond… […] without condemnation, restrictions, compromises, or closets.' (85).

David Drake's *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me* can be regarded as a failure in embodying the queer intervention it proposed, since he failed to truly problematize binary opposites of identity in favour of a optimistic ending that remains essentialist. Despite being a vehicle for Act Up and the Queer Nation approaches to gay rights, Drake's depiction is submissive and assimilative, not undermining heteronormative structures, and instead affirming an essential identity. Morover, Drake also fails in the problematization of the spectatorial gaze he was addressing. As a text that was constructed within and addressed to a 'constituency' audience or interpretive community, Drake failed to radically intervene in the privileged gaze of the gay male audience to which his body was offered and affirmed. As a celebration of gay masculine sexuality and political affirmation his text succeeded in re-iterating the assumptions and cultural ideologies of the spectators, rather than subverting their perceptions of the 'queer body' or enabling a critical engagement with their constructed identities, desires and community. His

'queer body' may have disconcerted the gaze of a heterocentric audience, but gay male spectatorial engagement failed to be confronted. The spectatorial context is thus vital to the activation and definition of transgression, and should Drake's body-text be placed within the interpretive community of the heterocentric mainstream the receptive effects of such a deviant spectacle and corporeal presence could radically begin to be envisaged. The deviant celebration and spectatorial gaze of Drake's perverse flesh would, therefore, begin to have the desired effect that his performance text so utopically attempts. Queer performance is thus effective when it transgresses all performance contexts and spectatorial boundaries, engaging with all 'types' of theatre and performance. Since the aim of such work is to destabilize and subvert the exchange between audiences and texts, its impetus is to not only invade the mainstream as a more obvious target to subvert, but more importantly to undermine the rigid defences of marginalized spectators themselves; thus revealing the constructedness of their own socio-cultural marginality. The gay and lesbian spectator is hence as potent a subject for deconstruction as the seemingly oppressive heterosexual.

Queer Utopias

The problem facing gays and lesbians in the queer new millennium is the dilemma posed by having to seemingly maintain a coherent identity, whilst simultaneously attempting to unravel the oppressive binary of the hetero/homo divide. As Lynda Hart argues: 'How do we resist reifying a metaphysical core without eliminating politically constructed identities?'[9] Queer theory's contentious response to such a dilemma is, of course, the thesis that identity categories are

[9] Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan, 'Acting Out: Feminist Performances', (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press., 1993), (p. 12).

performatives, acts of signifying systems that merely gain efficacy through unchallenged stylized repetition and social conditioning. But these theories of performativity are quite problematic in relation to theories of performance and theatre. Spectators who are marginalized by the imposition of restrictive identity categories are sutured to such formations, since a reliance upon identification is crucial in producing a motivated drive towards social and ideological change. Therefore, how do such sutured spectators 'identify' with more fluid and multiple categories in performance, and is it possible to gauge such responses? Where can a site of 'inclusive' interpellation of identification be located within such practices? Drake does not only undress on stage, but makes his body a central device of performance, which epitomizes what Jill Dolan sees as the 'efficacy' of theatrical performance, since it 'offers a temporary and usefully ephemeral site at which to think through questions of the signifying body, of embodiment, of the undecidability of the visual, and of the materiality of the corporeal.'[10] Yet this efficacy in terms of queer performance is undermined by the way in which Drake's corporeality is deployed within the text, 'solidified' as a material given rather than 'dissolved' as a fluid possibility.

The Night fails as a queer text because it refuses to challenge or engage with the constructedness of Drake's gay identity, or even attempt to articulate a queer deconstruction of his social subjectivity and the potential re-readings/presentations that his body could provoke. His validated autobiography authoritatively affirms his privileged gay white male identity in a celebration of the whiteness of his flesh. Drake's conceptually 'queer body' is thus the product of a specifically (heteronormative) masculinity, that does little to intervene in the hegemonic 'order of

[10] Jill Dolan, 'Geographies of Learning: Theatre Studies, Performance and the "Performative"', *Theatre Journal*, 45 (1993), 433.

things' or the imbalances of binary configurations. His audience is made up of the very community from which he speaks, and so he is in essence 'preaching to the converted.' The content of his text makes little attempt to confront his relationship with the gaze of the spectator, or problematize that relationship, since he merely conforms to the contextual expectations of the event and his own 'history' of performance. The value and impact of Drake's work within the community is of course indisputable, but is far less affective when situated within a specifically queer paradigm of performance. Drake's empathetic spectators are the ideal audience for such work, with shared material conditions and a universalized spectatorial position; but the political efficacy of such work would be its dissemination within a wider community. Drake's body is celebrated as the essential gay male, unified despite the incessant assaults of homophobia and disease, but nowhere near the critical impact his 'marked' body could achieve.

As an emblematic product of a 'heteronormative symbolic order' (whether homosexual or heterosexual), the male body is inevitably the primary site for effective sexo-linguistic subversion and the possibility of a horizon of queerness. The lesbian-feminist discourses that dominate queer theory which sought to 're-focus' the material sources of linguistic product in order to induce a new formation of the symbolic, thus contend that the only real hegemonic assault and political efficacy of queer performance must be to re-address and reinscribe the fragility of the masculine body in its many embodiments; in particular, its deployment as a dominant signifier of phallogocentric power: 'For lesbians and gay men, the production of real intervention, and by this I mean intervention that produces social change - requires the agency of living bodies. Our bodies are the issue. How we use them to define and

defy the regimes of cultural practice determines the reconstructive moments of our future.'[11]

Queer perspectives, then, expose the unstable and performative aspects of identity, and its deployment as a tool of ideological control. By decentring the nature of masculine identity, sexuality becomes a product that is theatrically and 'dramatically produced' through behaviour and gesture, projected and re-enacted through performative actions that exist within a fluid and shifting field of meaning. Queer theorists are not necessarily satisfied with merely analysing subordinate lesbian and gay communities as the exclusive site of sexual difference, but more specifically interrogate the very structures and binaries through which they gain meaning, and thereby seek to deconstruct texts that had previously been assembled through heterocentric discursive paradigms, enabling alternate sub-texts and paradigms that reconfigure the nature of deviancy to heterosexuality itself. Heterosexuality is hence once again projected as a contentious social structure that masks an inherently fluid deviancy beneath, and the highly contentious idea that heterosexuals themselves are potentially just as 'queer' as homosexuals. As a critical framework, queer studies focuses upon a deconstruction of artistic, cultural and literary texts, in order to foreground their unmarked inconsistencies and inscriptions as a product of culture and society, and hence the tenuousness of the mechanisms of their functioning. 'Queer' as a philosophical practice, however, acknowledges the impossibility of moving totally outside common conceptions of sexuality, since it is materially impossible to truly place ourselves 'outside' of the heterocentric matrix (even if the matrix itself seeks to achieve this end), nor entirely inside, because each of these terms comes into being, of course, through their relation to each other.

[11] Hart and Phelan, p. 34.

The overall aim of queer theory then is to negotiate limits, and thus expose regulatory structures which impose imbalances of power and gender/sexual hierarchies. Yet, whilst purporting to address the categories of sex, sexuality and gender as strategic performative articulations of an oppressive heterocentric hegemony, there is also a recurring hegemonic discourse shaping queer theory itself, which can also be seen as discursively delimiting and oppressive in relation to non-polymorphous forms of identity, if such a utopian formation is possible. With lesbian-feminist revisions of psychoanalysis and discourse theory forming the basis of queer, the dominant order and linguistic field of the 'masculine' is hence the most 'essential' site of contention. Yet where does this notion of course place the 'queer male' within such a matrix? The possessive and volatile reaction to masculinist appropriations of 'queer' identity, as evidenced by Phelan's criticisms of Drake's work, thus implies an additionally 'masked' exclusivity from within such a seemingly 'open' discursive paradigm that finds its efficacy in explorations of butch/femme role-play and a re-configuration of the feminine.

From a queer viewpoint, heterocentricism is constructed and proliferated through a specifically masculine linguistic field (irrespective of gender and sexual orientation) and, therefore, it is only through an alternate non-masculine field of signification that subversiveness may be attained and regulatory categories subverted. Queer male theorists have hence found themselves almost forced into the identity category of 'gay' in order to access any form of radical critique or subversive economy, since queer seems to be a contemplative ideal that is beyond their reach from within such a 'lesbocentric' discursive field. However, a 'gay theory' is limited not only by the contentiousness of its essentialist polemics (irrespective of its value within social 'reality'), but more importantly by the

oppressive privilege of its engendered sexual perspective from within a particularly reiterative homo-patriarchy. If gender and sexual epistemology is the construct of a masculine linguistic paradigm, a process of queering can be seen as attainable only when enunciated through a more polymorphous understanding of the feminine, as a repudiated and, therefore, subversively potent locus of re-interpretation. Although the concept of 'the lesbian' identity is also another example of a problematic and exclusionary essentialist identity category, a 'lesbian theory' and corporeality that is 'othered' and detached from a masculine specificity is thus more open to play and re-signification, and an effective point of departure to begin to unravel the 'phallacys' and performatives of heterocentric discourse. Queer performance, then, is able to explore the critical frameworks that deconstruct the performative nature of regimes of power and corporeal concepts of 'the body', and can thus attempt to locate new ways of re-articulation and embodiment. The queer body can be seen as a body in flux: moulded and constrained by external condition, yet conflicted by internal instability. Theatre and performance provide the context within which it can exhibit the performativity of 'symptoms', in conflict with an analytical and interventionist gaze.

Indeed, these are the creative limitations of heteronormatively ordered theories of 'acting' and 'the body in performance.' If the 'truth' of the body in performance lies within a pre-discursive metaphysical experiential realm (formulated namely by Merleau-Ponty or Artaud), then it is a corporeality that, by disavowing the oppressive limitations of the symbolic, begins to envisage the polymorphously perverse corporeality of the 'queer real.' Queer performance then, is not only a 'conscious' act of re-vision and re-inscription of the linguistic processes of embodiment, but more importantly (and contentiously) lies at the very material

essence of the body itself. Although notions of 'spectatorship' and 'objective' forms of written analysis provide insightful hermeneutic possibilities, a process of disembodiment will always be central to academic discourses that tend to elevate the researcher's 'writerly' subjectivity, whilst disallowing them any perception of their own position as a queer body in a 'world of others':

> The subject returns from its recessive poststructuralist death, but it returns removed, counter-mimetic, not as originary. The subject returns *as a subject's guise,* indeed *performative,* like a ghost in a body-suit, donned and wielded in a show of social and political significances, manipulating and bent on exposing the historical mechanisms of a social drama which has parsed its players, by bodily markings, into subjects and objects. [12]

[12] R. Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 180-81.

● CONCLUSION ●

Theatre places us right at the heart of what is religious-political: in the heart of absence, in negativity, in nihilisme as Nietzsche would say, therefore in the question of power. A theory of theatrical signs, a practice of theatrical signs (dramatic text, mise en scène, interpretation, architecture) are based on accepting the nihilisme inherent in a re-presen-tation. Not only accepting it: reinforcing it. For the sign, Peirce used to say, is something which stands to somebody for something. To Hide, to Show: that is theatricality. But the modernity of our fin-de-siècle is due to this: there is nothing to be replaced, no lieu-tenancy is legitimate, or else all are; the replacing – therefore the meaning – is itself only a substitute for displacement. […] Is theatricality thus condemned?

- Jean-Francois Lyotard, 'The Tooth, The Palm', 1976

Queer Futurities

The sceptical and rather suspicious way in which queer critical frameworks view identity categories has been criticized by many opponents as a highly 'apolitical or even reactionary form of intellectualising.'[1] In fact, a number of anti-queer theorists have accused such a destabilising process as inherently 'homophobic', since it deliberately disavows the 'common sense' nature of such a seemingly 'trans-historical' lesbian and gay identity. Yet, what these criticisms of queer theory consistently ignore is the 'ideological dimension' which, as Lee Edelman argues, 'reinforces the hypostatization [reification] of the "natural" upon which homophobia relies and thus partakes of an ideological labour complicit with heterosexual supremacy.'[2] For what this convergence of 'common sense' and 'knowledge' continually tends to reify is the unacknowledged and legitimate 'operation of unexamined ideological structures.'[3]

The inevitable contentiousness that has surrounded queer theory over recent years has mainly focused upon its efficacy as a political strategy. A 'coherent and unified identity' has been a crucial pre-requisite for the consolidation of lesbian and gay politics since the seventies. However, as Judith Butler contends, 'the deconstruction of identity is not the deconstruction of politics; rather, it establishes as political the very terms through which identity is articulated.'[4] It is the deployment of the term 'queer' itself that has evoked the most dissent, since 'the simplest objection to queer comes from those one might expect to be among its constituents, and yet are neither interpellated by the term nor persuaded that the new category describes or

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[1] Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction,* (New York: New York University Press, 2000 [1996]), p. 101.

[2] Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive,* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), p. xviii.

[3] Jagose, p. 103.

[4] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2007 [1990]), p. 149.

represents them.'[5] Rather than embrace the term for its potential political re-deployment, a number of objectors, often seen as endemic of the 'gay generation gap' are unable to accept such a historically pejorative term as a positive means of identification.[6]

Advocates of this queer reclamation of previously oppressive forms of terminology perceive such an act as a powerful form of cultural re-appropriation, since it is 'strategically useful in removing the word from that homophobic context in which it formerly flourished', whereas, in contrast to such optimism, its opponents argue that such a utopian endeavour 'misrecognizes' the fact that such a change in nomenclature and semantics fails to really 'transform cultural assumptions and knowledges.'[7] If such a re-signification were truly attainable then there would inevitably be an endless supply of 'neologisms' to take its place:

> [w]hatever social transformations may be secured by proliferating queer as a positive term of self-description, they will be neither absolute nor uncontestable. Even though queer has been appropriated by a new generation, which recognises itself in that term without equivocation, homophobia is not going to be rendered speechless or lack an intelligible vocabulary with which to make itself understood.[8]

This counter-productive reading of 'queer' which perpetuates associations with 'perversion' and 'illegitimacy' envisages that such a strategy is in danger of alienating itself from the very community that it seeks to radicalize. And the 'trendiness' that has come to be associated with a paradigm that foregrounds style over substance has, as Edelman argues, created 'a version of identity politics as

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[5] Jagose, p. 103.
[6] See Christopher Reed, '"Queer" a Sneer No More', *Age,* (30 June 1993), p. 15.
[7] Jagose, p. 104.
[8] Ibid. pp. 104-05.

postmodern commodity fetishism.'[9] The effect of which Donald Morton complains, 'trivializes the very notion of queerness by reducing it to nothing more than a "lifestyle", certain ways of talking, walking, eating, dressing, having your hair cut and having sex.'[10] The elitism of queer intellectualism has also constructed an 'increasingly specialized vocabulary and analytical models' that disavows any real sense of 'accountability' outside of the academic context of its articulation, by intellectuals 'whose privilege is said to insulate them from the 'reality' they nevertheless feel licensed to analyse.'[11] And more controversially, the deployment of queer as an 'umbrella' term to seemingly 'unite' a diversity of divergent identities ('the oxymoronic community of difference') problematically proposes a commonality that fails to acknowledge their fundamental difference.[12] A failure which also 'raises the possibility of locating sexual perversion as the very precondition of an identificatory category, rather than a destabilization or variation of it', thereby allowing a 'collective' of all non-normative sexuality (including rape and paedophilia).[13] Such an indiscriminating coalition of non-normative sexual identity, therefore, destabilizes the respectability and political achievements of the very lesbian and gay community that have provided queer the opportunity of articulation. Morton also doubts the ability of queer theory to sustain any real form of radical critique, due to the ease by which it has become 'institutionalized' and appropriated in order to 'consolidate a hegemonic postmodern culture': 'the "dreamlike" success of Queer Theory today is enabled precisely by its tendency to endorse and celebrate

[9] Edelman, p. 114.
[10] Donald Morton, '"Radicalism", "Outing", and the Politics of (Sexual) Knowledges', *Minnesota Review*, 40 (1993), 151.
[11] Jagose, p. 110.
[12] L. Duggan, 'Making It Perfectly Queer', *Socialist Review*, 22 (1992), 19.
[13] Jagose, pp. 113-14.

the dominant academy's narrative of progressive change.'[14] However, queer's overall impact upon identity politics has yet to be fully determined. As Annamarie Jagose argues, '[q]ueer has little to gain from establishing itself as a monolithic identity category.'[15] It does not project itself as some form of 'improved version' of lesbian and gay identity, but rather as a strategy by which to question 'the assumptions that – intentional or otherwise – inhere in the mobilization of any identity category, including itself.'[16]

In contrast to the 'flawed' nineties queer texts examined in previous chapters, there is in particular one mainstream text which has achieved much in initiating the beginnings of a distinctly queer theatre practice in the final years of the last millennium: Terence McNally's *Corpus Christi* (1998).[17] In contrast to his earlier positivist and ennobling gay drama *Love! Valour! Compassion!,* McNally explores the ultimate thematic and cultural taboo with *Corpus Christi,* by envisaging a distinctively queer re-interpretation of the story of Christ. The overwhelming effect of such a transgressive endeavour was illustrated by the numerous 'fatwas' and bomb threats that were levelled at both the author and the company for daring to attempt such a blasphemy. Even though theologians, painters and writers have consistently speculated on both Christ and his disciples' sexuality for centuries, to actually enact such a concept before an audience is seen by many of heteronormative culture (and the religious right) to be the ultimate impossible perversion.

McNally as a playwright has consistently occupied rather a shifting and contentious role in recent gay and queer theatre. Whereas *Love! Valour!*

[14] Donald Morton, 'The Politics of Queer Theory in the (Post)-Modern Moment', *Genders,* 17 (1993), 123.

[15] Jagose, p. 126.

[16] Ibid. p. 126.

[17] *Corpus Christi* brought crowds of angry picketers to the Manhattan Theater Club to protest his satiric re-imagination of Jesus as a sexually active gay teenager in McNally's hometown of Corpus Christi, Texas. McNally received death threats and the New York production was cancelled and then reinstated, finally opening on 13 October 1998, directed by Joe Mantello.

Compassion! fits more easily into the canon of 'affirmative' gay plays, other works such as *Corpus Christi* have demonstrated quite a distinctively queer approach. John M. Clum also finds McNally's work problematic since it is 'disconnected from the real problems facing gay men.'[18] It is the valorization of youth culture and social anarchy in these works that Clum sees as problematic to the seemingly more 'authentic' experiences of 'his generation': '[y]outh is sexy; age isn't. Youth is idealistic and optimistic; age is anxious and cynical.'[19] McNally's 'arrested development' then as a playwright, to use Clum's phrase, is primarily a result of the fact that his 'self-identification is all over the place' and so it is identity that once again signals the mark of authenticity for gay theatre.[20]

The main theatrical importance of *Corpus Christi*, however, (blasphemous content aside) is that it is quite specifically a queer 'event', a communal exploration of and intervention in the nature of 'truth' and transgression between the audience and the performers. The negative media hype that surrounded the play was crucial in that it succeeded in projecting such debates into mainstream discourse, thereby disseminating queer strategies into the very heart of cultural debate. The audience is thus fully aware that they are actively engaging with and witnessing a moment of transgression, challenging social discourses on morality and tradition in favour of experiencing a deliberately queer 'reading' of cultural mythology. The audience is hence openly adopting the role of deviant other in opposition to judgmental and oppressive socio-cultural dissent, irrespective of their own actual sexual or social status. This active process of consensual 'othering' is consequently quite effective in

[18] John M. Clum, *Still Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama*, (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2000), p. 279.
[19] Ibid. p. 280.
[20] Ibid. p. 281.

exposing to the audience not only the experience of oppression, but the questionable nature of normative ideas of value and truth.

This 'deviant' role is increased for the audience members as they enter the theatre, since they not only face the wrath of the protesters outside, but are also searched as they enter the auditorium, thus revealing the 'danger' of being positioned in a deviant relation to the norm. As a perceivably 'heterocentric' audience (as defined by mainstream homogenaic terms), their normative relation to the processes of mainstream theatre is thus totally re-configured, in that they are made aware of their normatively unquestioning relation to mainstream theatre discourse; but more importantly, the social efficacy of usurping such traditions and the value of transgression is overwhelmingly enforced. Although a definition of the audience as 'heterocentric' is problematic in that it also homogenizes a concept of 'the audience' that is impossible to determine, it is a referent to a culturally produced protocol of 'theatre-going; that despite its diversity on a number of gender, sexual and ethnographic levels, is consistently immersed within theatre discourses that seek to delimit what mainstream theatre practice and reception should entail. Theatre discourses are perpetuated which, therefore, seek to construct and address a type of audience wherein 'difference' is unmarked in favour of a commonality of cultural expectation, and an assumed prerequisite of spectatorial passivity, However, the volatility of the experience of being a spectator to *Corpus Christi* could be seen to shatter such homogeneity, since differences are immediately brought to the surface and play a vital role in the audience's awareness of one another, and the play that they are witnessing.

The transgression of spatial boundaries is quite important to this type of radicalized queer theatre, as illustrated upon the audience's entry into the

auditorium/theatre space. In a rather Brechtian fashion, there is at first no real demarcation between audience space and performance space and, therefore, conventional demarcations between the 'real' space of the audience and the fantasy space of the performance are erased. The actors are dressed in everyday clothes, indiscernible from the audience members, which thus implies a sense of commonality and community in the act of transgression about to take place:

> The house lights are still up as the ACTORS begin to drift on stage. They are wearing street clothes. They may either talk among themselves, greet people in the audience, or quietly prepare for the performance. Some of them will check the props tables, which are visible stage right and left. The mood is informal, lightly bantering, loving even.[21]

Although this approach to theatre is hardly revolutionary, and owes much to the work of Bertolt Brecht and the political theatre of the fringe, it is the specific social context and political environment within which such an approach to theatre takes place that gives *Corpus Christi* its particular effect. In fact, such a 'de-political' and conventional use of 'political theatre' techniques is infused with a renewed efficacy and importance here, since it defiantly takes place despite an external environment of threat and denunciation.

Contrary to the usual aesthetic spectacle expected of mainstream theatre, the performance space is minimalist to the extreme, thus placing specific focus upon the queer re-interpretation of the narrative that is articulated. It is this re-interpretation that is crucial to the event, and not the typical illusory trappings of a passive realist

[21] Terrence McNally, *Corpus Christi*, (New York: Grove Press, 1998), p. 1. Subsequent references to Terrence McNally's *Corpus Christi* will be placed within parentheses in the text and will be to this edition, unless stated otherwise.

theatricality. The performers make no attempt to embody their characters, make no claims to authoritative truth, but merely 'spin a bottle' in order to decide which one of them will introduce this 'queer rebirth' to the audience: which one of them will be the first to transgress. As the characters/performers are introduced, they are 'baptized' and blessed for their 'divinity as a human being' which is celebrated in all its diversity. Even though Christ/Joshua and his disciples are all represented as gay, McNally goes to great lengths to construct characters that are 'against type.' The fluid way in which the performers move in and out of character thus intervenes in any real possibility of character-identification or realism. A multiplicity of identity is, therefore, projected that conveys a number of performative significations, but more directly foregrounds the act of performance itself as a process, and as a consciously constructed role that is thus transitory and open to re-interpretation and inhabitation by other bodies. The 'relevance' of this queer re-interpretation of the story of Christ is hence unfixed, re-configured and re-contextualized. The inscription of homosexuality within such a homosocial erotic structure is parodic and inevitable, and the campiness of such a fusion of the biblical context with the contemporary gay male's acerbic wit both ironic and poignant. This juxtaposition of gay culture and identity with religious iconography thus attempts to problematize the transience of epistemological structures of 'truth' and 'value', with the tenuous alignment of an iconic narrative with the seemingly 'real' narratives of contemporary life. The text is, therefore, merely revelling in the deviance of such an act of 'queering', and not necessarily imbuing the work with any real significance.

The lack of specificity in McNally's play is supported by critical responses to *Corpus Christi* (such as Clum's) that whilst celebrating the production's defiance in the face of extremist condemnation, attacked its overwhelming lack of 'relevance' to

the gay community it was seemingly addressing. Since Joshua (like Christ) is finally betrayed by Judas and crucified in a rather detached manner, critics have condemned the play's denouement for 'missing an opportunity' to make his death 'relevant' to gay men today (ie. by stereotypically being beaten to death by homophobes or to die of AIDS). By having Pilate condemn this 'queer' Jesus to death, instead of a right-wing politician, the political ideology is subsequently regarded as dissoluted and lacking in real political efficacy. What these critics fail to realise is that by refusing to conform to an accepted gay politics or social relevance, in favour of exposing how readily discourses can be deconstructed and re-interpreted (and the social controversy such a process invokes) is where its value as a radically queer piece of theatre lies. It is in the very act of transgression from within the mainstream of theatre and cultural discourse that a queer vision can begin to be articulated. McNally does not set out to make a piece of gay theatre, but more importantly begins to envisage a type of theatre wherein the boundaries between epistemology, representation and performance can begin to merge:

> The Actor Playing John: Our Play is over but the end is still to come.
>
> All these things you have seen and heard are the first birth pangs of the new age…
>
> The Actor Playing Thaddeus: Maybe other people have told His story better. Other actors.
>
> This was our way.
>
> The Actor Playing Simon: If we have offended, so be it. (80-81)

During a time when theatre as a practice is generally regarded to have lost its impact in any real political or ontological way, the renewed cultural potency of plays such as *Corpus Christi* have revealed the inherent value of applying queer theatrical strategies to the mainstream. The achievements of such artists as McNally (though not exclusively of course) have revealed the over-riding need for a queer approach to performance, and the innovation it envisages for theatre practice in the new queer millennium:

> [t]he crucial issue now is not the contested place of gay men in our society, but what 'gay' will mean in the twenty-first century, whether the term has outlived its historical moment, and how same-sex desire fits into a larger constellation of issues. For those of us invested in theatre, the issue is also what theatre will mean for gay men. We're out onstage and off. Now what?[22]

As a queer intervention, the aim of this thesis has been to examine non-normative masculinities constructed and represented in American drama, theatre and performance throughout the second half of the twentieth century, thus assessing the queer challenges these masculinities present to hegemonic heteronormativity. And most importantly, deconstruct established conceptions on the works here analysed, considered to be the most assimilative, which through a queer-inflected close reading can be in fact read as the most subversive. Whereas queer is perceived as a distinctively late twentieth-century paradigm, it is evident from this research that it is very much present in mid-twentieth-century American theatre, pre-empting queer theoretical debates on identity, performance and gender by over twenty-five years.

[22] Clum, p. 317.

As demonstrated in previous chapters, Tennessee Williams's and Mart Crowley's works can be read as queer. They may not have perceived themselves as constructing 'queer identities' in their texts, but demonstrated a common distrust of social control, morality and epistemology that they worked through within a more in-determinant (ie. pre-queer) and fluidly deviant context. However, the openly gay theatre and militantly queer theatre of the eighties and nineties, namely Larry Kramer's, Tony Kushner's, Terrence McNally's and David Drake's works, despite being written and set in a time of gay liberation, though rather aligned with AIDS, either advocate for the restoration of patriarchy through the end of sexual promiscuity within the gay community, or disempower determined identities, or simply portray an idyllic gay lifestyle.

Theatre and performance have consistently played a vital role in developing works that deliberately set out to disconcert or confront their audience in some way, a fact that queer has profitably been able to capitalize upon. It is the ideal location wherein to exploratively 'play out' and experiment with the complexities of such an 'abstruse' theoretical paradigm, or attempt to reconcile its inevitable conflicts. Despite its contentious nature, queer demonstrates, as Jagose argues, 'a conceptually unique potential as a necessarily unfixed site of engagement and contestation.'[23] Queer is an identity category that has no desire to consolidate or stabilize itself, and maintains an understanding that even its own efficacy is subject to 'exclusionary and reifying effects far in excess of those intended.'[24] Performance, therefore, provides the creative context within which such effects and excesses could begin to be envisaged:

[23] Jagose, p. 129.
[24] Ibid. p. 131.

> [q]ueer is not outside the magnetic field of identity. Like some postmodern architecture, it turns identity inside out, and displays its supports exoskeletally. If the dialogue between queer and more traditional identity formations is sometimes fraught – which it is – that is not because they have nothing in common. Rather, lesbian and gay faith in the authenticity or even political efficacy of identity categories and the queer suspension of all such classifications energise each other, offering in the 1990s – and who can say beyond? – the ambivalent assurance of an unimagined future.[25]

In Butler's words, it is impossible 'to separate our "gender" from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained. […] Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.'[26] Such a definition of gender approaches a definition of theatre itself and suggests that the portrayal of gender on stage is not only mimetic, but, indeed, part of the collective cultural description of sexual identity. Thus, while theatre is myth-making (as it has traditionally been held to be), it is also gender-making, and in being so, it has a political responsibility to present new images that no longer frame male or female bodies or senses of 'self', a multiplicity of images, upon which the 'self' of its spectators may gaze in search of potential, and perhaps provisional or momentary, identities. Perhaps in this way, gay men, cross-dressers, lesbians, bisexuals and transsexuals, among many others, may less and less need to depend, like Blanche Dubois, on the 'kindness of strangers.'

[25] Ibid. p. 132.
[26] Butler, p. 3 and 33.

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