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Jake Whitney

University of Nebraska at Kearney, whitneyj2@lopers.unk.edu

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“MY FLESH WAS ITS OWN SHIELD”
EROTICISM IN AIDS ACTIVISM

A Thesis
Presented to the
Graduate Faculty of the History Department
and the
Faculty of the Graduate College
University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
University of Nebraska at Kearney

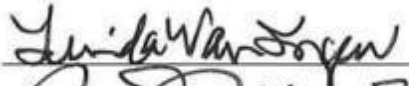




By
Jake Whitney

June 2023

THESIS ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance for the faculty of the Graduate College, University of Nebraska, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in History, University of Nebraska at Kearney.

Supervisory Committee

Name	Department
	History
	History
	Sociology / WOGS
	Hist.
	Supervisory Committee Chair
June 28, 2023	Date

Abstract

The most enduring images of the HIV/AIDS crisis are pictures of ACT UP members being arrested and staging die-ins or men huddled together in hospital beds. These images and the historical narrative accompanying them espouse unity, a coming together of the queer community. No one manufactured this unity. Gay men came together to fight AIDS with force stronger than that which had fought back at Stonewall. Although the gay community saw increased unity during the AIDS Pandemic, the benefactors of this unity, the mainstream gay movement, marginalized men practicing radical sex through a rhetoric of anti-eroticism, a negative, rather than safer sex, a positive. This sacrifice is present only in reading between the lines of the current historiography. While the earliest gay documentation of the crisis is very clear on where the mainstream movement sits concerning radical sex, later work glosses over this position. This anti-eroticism in mainstream gay activism is countered by an intensely erotic activism from the radical sex community. This argument is made with the sources produced by gay men at the time, relying on popular literature as well as periodicals and newsletters of radical sex communities.

For Gaetan Dugas, Robert Mapplethorpe, and the thousands of gay men blamed for their own deaths by members of the gay community.

Acknowledgments

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I am also grateful to Amber Alexander for fielding what felt like hundreds of emails my first week of the program, as well as endless advice and support every step of the way. Additionally, thanks must be given to Mel Leverich, archivist and collection librarian of the Leather Archives and Museum in Chicago, IL. Many thanks to Andie and Nick for both their incredible support and distraction.

I would be remiss in not mentioning my families biological and queer. The unwavering encouragement and support of my parents, my siblings; Kinlee, Lyle, Markie, and Neil, and, Alexander, Jaedyn, Quinton, Kayl, and DataCat have meant the world to me.

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INTRODUCTION: “LOVE HARD, BUT LOVE!”

My thoughts are crowded with death
 And it draws so oddly on the sexual
 that I am confused
 confused to be attracted
 by, in effect, my own annihilation
 “In Time of Plague,” Thom Gunn

“The promiscuous homosexual,” author John Rechy wrote in 1977, “is a sexual revolutionary.”¹ This promiscuity, as well as other radical sex acts practiced by gay men, has at once been both the foundation of postwar gay culture, and a source of contempt from both the heterosexual community and gay men alike. Since the 1960s no singular act has divided the gay community like fisting, an activity author and historian John Manuel Andriote describes as men submitting “to the invasion of their rectum by another man’s fingers, hand and even forearm.”² The only activities that seem to rival fisting happened down the hall at bathhouses where fisting took place: flogging, piss, chains, and yes sometimes even scat. These radical sex acts, along with the hyper-promiscuity inspired by the sexual liberation of the 1960s drew a line down the middle of an already disparate community.³ A seemingly petty disagreement revolving around respectability politics and personal actions, however, became a matter of life and death at the beginning of the 1980s when gay men started dying in droves.

¹ John Rechy, *The Sexual Outlaw: A Documentary*, (New York: Dell Publishing, 1977), 28.

² John Manuel Andriote. *Victory Deferred: How AIDS Changed Gay Life in America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 23.

³The gay community is not now, nor has it ever been a single unified community. Leathermen, drag performers, and clones have often been at each other’s throats. This was the subject of many letters to the editor of *Drummer* magazine April 1983, after a man had written in two months prior complaining about the femininity of drag queens

In a cruel twist of irony, the Village People closed out the 1970s singing about how they, a group with complicated ties to the gay community, were ready for the 1980s, they promised it would be “the time of my life.” The song, with a hint of prophetic voice, promised that in the 1980s “We will realize just who we are, we can move as one.”⁴ As it turned out, community unity was the most important tool of survival as the gay community faced HIV/AIDS for most of the 1980s alone. This theme of community isolation is present in the most enduring images of the early HIV/AIDS crisis: men huddled together in hospital beds, and ACT UP protests. This unity was not false, gay men who previously had very little to do with each other came together, and staged a fight few were willing to fight.⁵ Although the gay community saw increased unity during the AIDS pandemic, the benefactors of this unity, the mainstream gay movement, marginalized men practicing radical sex through a rhetoric of anti-eroticism, a negative, rather than safer sex, a positive.

Radical Sex

At the center of this thesis, either in their own voice or as the subject of others, are practitioners of radical sex. There are three, overlapping communities which made up the majority of the radical sex practitioners. The leather community was historically the most organized group, the second and smallest community were fisters, and finally the far less formal community of promiscuous cruising men called “clones.” These three groups, while not synonymous with each other, were often thrown together by themselves and

⁴ The Village People, “Ready for the 80s,” *Live and Sleazy*, (New York: Casablanca 1979).

⁵ Gay men are by no means the only people affected by AIDS. However the historiographic work on AIDS is often homonormative. Sarah Schulman expanded the historiography of AIDS activism by describing the work of activists who did not fit the acceptive homonormative model. In a similar way, this thesis is broadening the historiographic lens of gay activism, without claiming they were the only people affected.

others. Functionally they were crossing boundaries as well, leathermen often cruised, clones participated in fisting, and fisters found partners at leather bars.

In 1954 a group of gay men in Los Angeles formed the Satyrs Motorcycle Club, the first gay motorcycle club. Four years later, in 1958, Chuck Arnet opened The Gold Coast in Chicago, the first gay leather bar. These were followed by the founding of other motorcycle clubs and leather bars, as the leather community made its way across America. Since the 1950s, leathermen have been having conversations about what makes a leatherman, if it is how he dresses or what sexual activities he participates in. The issue is the place of sadomasochism (SM) in the leather community, whether practicing SM is a necessary component of the leather community and leather sexuality.

If any book were a leather classic, it is Larry Townsend's 1972 *The Leatherman's Handbook*. This book served as an introduction to the leather community, and dealt with issues like finding a partner (Chapter Six), motorcycles (Chapter Eight), and literature (Chapter Fifteen). Townsend was long one of the leather communities most trusted voices. Although he rarely spoke publicly.⁶ He also regularly wrote an advice column for *Drummer*, one of the most popular leather magazines specializing in erotic stories and photographs. In his book Townsend did not give a strict definition of a leatherman, the leather community, or leather sex. In his first chapter, however, titled "Why Leathersex?", he offered a glimpse into the definition debate. "As with homosexuality itself, it is difficult to say whether leathersex has gained a significantly greater vogue during the last

⁶ In a letter to Gay Male SM Activists Townsend, apologetically, explained that he would not be able to speak at a meeting as he was not good at addressing crowds, nor did he like to do it. Despite his lack of public speaking engagements Townsend remained an incredibly influential figure in the leather community. Townsend to GMSMA, 17 January 1982, GMSMA collection, Leather Archive and Museum, Chicago, IL.

few years, or whether it's always been widely practiced—simply kept locked away in its own specialized closet. But S & M sex has roots reaching far back into history.”⁷ For Townsend, leathersex, the practice of leathermen is primarily SM, the actual leather was secondary. Townsend furthered this notion when, after reading the book, the prospective leatherman realizes that he has no idea how to care for the rather expensive articles of leather clothing he bought. Still, despite being secondary to the type of sex that leathermen have, leather garments had a place in Townsend's idea of a leatherman. In fact, when discussing the equipment a leatherman ought to have, the first two things Townsend listed were a leather belt and leather boots. The belt served two purposes, first of course is its normal sartorial function, second is the use of the belt as bondage equipment. He notes, "Two partners: two belts. There are times when you have nothing else and must get by with only this minimal equipment."⁸ The boots, like the belt, served two functions, this time the look was more important than the functionality of the boot as active sex equipment, but Townsend gives leathermen a creative list of ways in which they can use a boot as sexual equipment.⁹ Even in his discussion of leather, Townsend placed sex and SM at the center of the discussion.

Where the leather community had a very wide scope, the community of fisters is much more narrow, brought together by participation in a single sexual act. Fisting is the act of one person inserting their whole hand, and sometimes their wrist and arm, into the anal or vaginal canal of themselves or another. In the context of this thesis, fisting refers almost exclusively to a partnered activity between cisgender men. The communities that

⁷ Larry Townsend, *The Leatherman's Handbook*, Los Angeles: Le Salon, 1972.

⁸ Townsend, *The Leatherman's Handbook*, 80.

⁹ Townsend, *The Leatherman's Handbook*, 82.

surrounded this activity were less formal than those that made up the leather communities. By the late 1970s, fisting clubs like Mid America Fists in Action emerged. However, the community was largely made up of men who cruised for fisting or went to clubs and parties where the participants mainly engaged in fisting. The Catacombs in San Francisco is perhaps the most storied of these spaces. Privately owned by Steve McEachern, entrance to The Catacombs required one's name to be on a list, a feat which required either knowing Steve or knowing someone who could vouch for you. Once inside The Catacombs, the focus was on "intense bodily experiences, intimate connection, male fellowship, and having a good time."¹⁰ The importance of intimacy and fellowship is central to the argument of this thesis.

While there was some crossover between the leather and fisting communities, they were not without conflict. Cultural anthropologist Gayle Rubin describes this friction:

“Many of the serious sadomasochists thought of Crisco as something that ruined leather, and some were scandalized by what they perceived as a lack of decorum and formality among fisters. On the other hand, many fisters were disinterested in S/M and some were openly hostile. To many fisters, S/M was at worst a form of brutality, and at best a noisy intrusion into the peaceful meditative atmosphere they sought.”¹¹

These difficulties and slight distinctions, though real were often ignored by men like Larry Kramer in his book *Faggots*. Publications like *Drummer* often included fisting content, for leathermen at large.

Rounding out the radical sex practitioners were clones. These men, far more numerous than either of the other groups, were much less organized but though

¹⁰ Gayle Rubin, “The Catacombs: A Temple of the Butthole,” *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice*, edited by Mark Thompson (Los Angeles: Daedalus Publishing Company, 2004), 123.

¹¹ Rubin, “The Catacombs: The Temple of the Butthole,” 129-130.

occasionally had overlap with the other groups. Existing on streets of urban gay centers, the clone, according to sociologist Martin P. Levine was “the community’s most defining social type.”¹² The name comes from the fact that these men adopted a similar look, all dressing in tight Levi 501s, tight t-shirts, work boots, sometimes a flannel or leather jacket. Aside from the uniform of the clone, what brought these men together was the activity of cruising. Cruising is a form of solicitation of sex from strangers expressed by cultural signals of body language, including eye contact, and nods.¹³ These men, and this practice were heavily criticized, alongside leathermen and fisters, by the mainstream gay movement, despite this these men have less overlap with the other two groups.

Leatherman Jim Stewart documented this division in his memoir about his time in San Francisco in the 1970s. Jim had just moved to Folsom Street, where the leather community was building steam. As he sat looking out the window of his apartment, he saw a man “wearing faded Levi’s [sic] and a plaid flannel shirt open half way down his hairless chest. . .His dark hair was clipped short. He wore a mustache.”¹⁴ Assuming the audience of his book was gay men, Stewart did not bother naming this man a clone. What he did note is that “He looked like he had found his way here from Castro Street.”¹⁵

These two streets in San Francisco are near enough that this would not be something worth noting if the cultures of the two streets were not so different. Castro street was the domain of the clones, whereas leathermen ruled Folsom Street. The encounter continues

¹² Martin P. Levine, *Gay Macho: The Life and Death of the Homosexual Clone* edited by Michael S. Kimmel (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 7.

¹³ Levine, *Gay Macho*, 3-4.

¹⁴ Jim Stewart, *Folsom Street Blues: A Memoir of 1970s SoMa and Leatherfolk in Gay San Francisco* (San Francisco: Palm Drive Publishing, 2011), 20.

¹⁵ Stewart, *Folsom Street Blues*, 20.

with Stewart cruising the man, concluded with a pantomime of public sex in Stewart's bathroom.¹⁶ Despite the difference in culture, the two groups were sometimes able to find common ground, particularly when it ended with mutually beneficial sex.

These three communities, different from each other but with overlapping members, often found themselves in the cross hairs of anti-eroticism. For this reason, despite their differences, these three groups are taken together as a larger group of radical sex practitioners.

Terminology

In this thesis the term “radical sex” is used instead of “non-normative sex.” This decision came after much deliberation over the decentering of heterosexuality. This is a project about gay men, told entirely through the words, works, and deeds of gay men, by a gay man. This fact has led the author to omit the use of the word gay as a modifier except when absolutely necessary. “The mainstream community” is always “the gay mainstream community”, a leatherman is always a gay leatherman. The modifier “gay” is no longer needed. Because this thesis turns the non-normative gay community into a normative community by focusing solely on gay men, what was once non-normative sex, same-sex monogamous partnered sexual relationships, becomes the norm.¹⁷ The use of the term non-normative sex in place of radical sex would stay true to this trend. However, as will be shown in chapters one and two, many of the men who are arguing for normative sex do not see what they are arguing for as conforming to any kind of norm

¹⁶ Stewart, 21.

¹⁷ Michael Kehler, studied the way high school boys PE locker rooms turn non-normative behavior into normative behavior when a non-normative space is studied as the normative space. Michael Kehler, “Examining Boys, Bodies, and PE Locker Room Spaces,” *Men's Lives*, edited by Michael S. Kimmel and Michael A. Messner, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019) 196-206.

and would argue that monogamy is the radical option in the face of promiscuity. These arguments come from looking at the community as a normative space. However, they ignore the fact that monogamy, even gay monogamy in the 1970s, might not have been the norm but it was *normative*.

The use of the term radical sex also acknowledges the political factors which lead to the sexual liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s. That men were wearing full leather during the day on Folsom Street, was not just a non-normative act, but a *radical* act of self-expression. To take a man's fist anally was a *radical* act of intimacy. To solicit sex on the street from likeminded strangers was a *radical* act of sexual liberation.

Fetishizing Nazism and Race

When describing what he intended to be a “typical” leather bar, author Geoff Mains says, “Most of the men are white, but there are some Latinos, some Asians, and half a dozen Blacks.”¹⁸ This racial makeup of the leather community allowed for shocking and sometimes problematic iterations of power exchange. The two most relevant iterations of this power dynamic are the fetishization of Nazi imagery and the Master/slave relationship and fantasy.¹⁹

The use of Nazi imagery, though a small part of the community, is inescapable. The small place that Nazi imagery had in the leather and SM communities allowed authors to use it for shock value in literature written about the community. Regardless of

¹⁸ Geoff Mains, *Urban Aboriginals: A Celebration of Leather Sexuality*, (Los Angeles: Daedalus Publishing, 2002), 21.

¹⁹ While protocol and style changes from person to person, relationship to relationship, the most common way to denote these types of relationships is by capitalizing the dominant title and not doing the same for the submissive title. In this case Master is capitalized and slave is not.

the number of men who fetishized Nazi imagery, the existence of this piece of the community demands examination.

The most iconic imagery of the leather community is that produced by artist Tom of Finland. The artist's distinctive style includes men wearing incredibly tight pants and shirts—if the men are wearing any shirts— short, cropped hair, inexplicably large muscles and even larger penises. All of these are signs of masculinity. Tom of Finland, as his name suggests, was from Finland. Born in 1920 he served in the Finnish military during World War II. This experience influenced his art. He described the blackouts during the war as incredibly erotic, as he would wander the streets looking for sex with Nazis. For Tom, the stormtroopers were "the most masculine" of all men.²⁰ This was by design. The Nazis, in developing their uniform, focused on the masculine. The uniform was meant to be a tight fit and would accentuate positive masculine traits making the men wearing it look tall, and fit.²¹ The focus on masculinity made the uniform the perfect object of fetishization for men interested in the eroticization of masculinity.

Although Tom of Finland drew erotic art of Nazis, it is difficult to find. The legacy of Tom's fascination with Nazis never went away. In 1981, *Drummer* published a "satire" piece in which two Canadian soldiers find evidence of two Nazis having sexual relations.²² The magazine replied to backlash, arguing it was satire and that only after heated discussion was the article published, and that there would not have been backlash if not for non-readers getting ahold of the piece and writing to the gay press about it.²³

²⁰ F. Valentine Hooven III, *Tom of Finland: His Life and Times*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 30.

²¹ Torsten Homberger, *The Honor Dress of the Moment: A Cultural History of Hitler's Brownshirt Uniform 1920-1933*. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2021), 181.

²² "Over There: Nazi War Story," *Drummer*, Issue 45, 1981.

²³ "The 'Nazi' Tempest," *Drummer*, Issue 47, 1981.

Drummer's assertion that Nazi satire would be understood in the leather community but was taken out of context by non-readers, allowed for space in the leather community for Nazi imagery, satire or not.

The eroticization of slavery manifested itself in two ways. The first, and most common, is the fantasy of being a sex slave. The second is the relationship of a Master and slave. Leathermen often treat these as two distinct entities. Author and Leatherman Joseph W. Bean argued that American Slavery might be the basis of the fantasy at large, but that it has very little to do with the actual long term Master/slave relationships.²⁴ While it might be true that racist fantasies were not the foundation of particular relationships, that does not change the fact that the racial dynamics of this community allowed for a "deracializing" of these fantasies. The fact that a majority of the community was white allowed for an eroticization of a racist power structure to be taken out of context.

The acceptability of the enactment of these fantasies is well beyond the scope of this thesis. However, both Nazi fetishism as well as slavery fantasies appear in the following chapters. The final scene of Kramer's *Faggots* takes place at a Nazi themed gang bang; the events of this final scene feature heavily in chapter one. The reenactment of slave auctions by the leather community were popular fundraisers both before and during the AIDS pandemic and come up in chapter four.

²⁴ Joseph W. Bean *Leathersex: A Guide for the Curious Outsider and the Serious Player* (Los Angeles: Daedalus Publishing, 1994), 148.

Eroticism

At this point a definition of eroticism becomes imperative. Robert Paul Dunn wrote “My Brother in Leather” for *Drummer* magazine in 1981. His description of his relationship with other leathermen sets a foundation for the erotic.

Together we have made a new kind of living. We have not won in the material sense of winning in the world. What we have gained could be called spiritual, but only in a redefinition of spiritual. My leather brother has carried the weight of who I am even as I have tried to carry others. He has revealed to me things about myself heretofore unknown. I have rested on his shoulders and know the first real peace. The duty to honor his brotherhood rests on mine.²⁵

What is lacking from Dunn’s description of his relationship with his brother in leather is mention of any kind of sexual relationship. Instead, Dunn focused on the intimacy and growth of self. What his brothers have done for him he has the duty to do for others. This commitment to intimacy and brotherhood was stressed over and over in radical sex communities. Ruben saw it in *The Catacombs* with the focus on “intense bodily experiences, intimate connection, male fellowship and having a good time.”²⁶ When describing the importance of cruising, author Alex Espinoza says “Cruising has provided a safe outlet for sexual exploration. . . True cruising allows people to set the terms of their desire, and both leave satisfied. It is founded on Equality.”²⁷ When seen through the lens of Audre Lorde’s “The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic of Power” what emerges is a clear articulation of eroticism. Lorde helps us interrogate the ties between sex and self-knowledge, a more direct way of stating what Dunn, Ruben, and Espinoza articulate.

At the beginning of her now classic essay Lorde defines the erotic in this way:

²⁵ Robert Pull Dunn, “My Brother in Leather,” *Drummer* no. 50 1981, 34.

²⁶ Ruben, “The Catacombs,” 123.

²⁷ Alex Espinoza, *Cruising: An Intimate History of a Radical Pastime* (Los Angeles: The Unnamed Press), 32.

The Erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change.²⁸

Lorde goes on to discuss the way the patriarchal culture suppressed the erotic in women, and women have tried to find power in the suppression of the erotic in themselves.

Although the larger argument Lorde is making has little direct bearing on the topic at hand; gay men despite homophobic rhetoric, are not women, the erotic, has its place in *all of us*. Lorde saw this function in two specific ways. First, sharing with another person, not necessarily sexually, is a key component of Lorde's erotic. Sharing forms links in such a way that differences fade and that which is not shared is more in reach. Secondly, the erotic for Lorde is "the open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy."²⁹ Going back to Dunn's "My Brother in Leather" the application of Lorde's erotic becomes more obvious.

The connection between Dunn and his leather brothers granted him "the first real peace." This link between Dunn and his brothers was similar to Lorde's convention. Where Lorde speaks of subduing difference and enlightening those involved, Dunn has experienced that with his brothers. When Dunn wrote "things about myself heretofore unknown," this must be similar to Lorde's unmitigated capacities for joy. Dunn's relationship with his brother in leather— which is not truly one person, but a stand in for the entire community— opened the erotic for him. This does not mean that every leather,

²⁸Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" in *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 53.

²⁹Lorde "The Uses of the Erotic, 56.

SM, fisting, or cruising encounter accessed the erotic in this sense. What is important is that all of them *have the possibility* of the erotic as expressed by Lorde.

Lorde's erotic is specifically political as a critique of the patriarchy; the gay men in question did not necessarily see their erotic encounters as political, though they were radical. The leather community at large was not donning their leathers and having intimate encounters as a means of political enlightenment. What they were doing, and why the erotic was a source of contention during the AIDS pandemic, was continuing to have these encounters. Rather than give up their brotherhood, these men found ways to make having erotic encounters safer. While some of the loudest voices in the community told them to simply stop and give up their self-knowledge, and their intimate connections the community did not.

The Crisis Timeline

No other disease was marred by cultural issues like HIV/AIDS was. Everyone, from journalists to scientists were influenced by the cultural aspects of the crisis. Journalists and the media at large ignored the crisis for too long because of who was affected, the news was no place for dying gay men and intravenous drug users. Scientists wasted time on dead ends, thinking perhaps poppers, a drug popular almost exclusively with gay men, were the cause.³⁰ Because of this, the timeline of the HIV/AIDS crisis is nearly impossible to pin down while satisfying everyone. Often the timeline looks something like this:

³⁰ Randy Shilts, *And The Band Played On* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 87.

The HIV/AIDS crisis is most often seen as “beginning” in 1981 with three key publications. The was first an item in the *Morbidity Mortality Weekly Report* regarding five gay men in Los Angles dying of a rare, incurable pneumonia. The second was a Center for Disease Control report about New York gay men with a cancer that was seen almost exclusively in older Mediterranean men. Finally, and most visibly was when *The New York Times* published "Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals" in July of 1981. More difficult to determine than the beginning of the crisis is its end. The introduction of Highly Active Antiretroviral Therapy (HAART) in 1996, is seen as the beginning of the end as this drug successfully lengthened the life of People with AIDS. In 1998 *The Bay Area Reporter*, San Francisco's weekly mainstream gay newspaper, published the headline “NO OBITS,” an incredible day of celebration when in years past the obituaries could run for two pages.³¹ This too has been seen as a mark of the end. For others it is the 2012 introduction of Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP), a drug which acts like birth control for HIV, that marked the end of the crisis. None of these ends satisfy the author, nor does it satisfy the historical record. Gay men continue to contract HIV, even after the release of these drugs. The CDC estimated that of the nearly 39,000 men who contracted HIV in the year 2016, 26,000 of those men contracted HIV through sexual contact with other men.³²

Rather than understanding the AIDS Crisis as having begun or ended at any particular point, this paper will take the view that the Crisis is ongoing. In order to make sense of the timeframe of the Crisis, this paper uses Julian Gill-Peterson’s “Haunting the

³¹ “No Obits” *Bay Area Reporter*, August 13, 1998.

³² Center for Disease Control, “HIV Among Gay and Bisexual Men,” 2016.

Queer Spaces of AIDS: Remembering ACT UP/New York and an Ethics of an Endemic.” This historian’s work views the ongoing crisis as separated into two phases: the epidemic and the endemic, based on the idea that eventually apathy seeped in as deaths slowed down.³³ The boundary where the epidemic ends and the endemic begins is blurry because all issues of the Crisis are rooted in the cultural nature of the HIV/AIDS crisis. This thesis will end in 1996, when the apathy truly began to set in because the drugs worked to stave off death, even if not everyone had access to them. The paper will describe the time from 1981 to the artificial end date of 1996 as "the pandemic." "The endemic," will be used to reference events after 1996. "The AIDS crisis" or simply "the Crisis" will be used to refer to the time from 1981 to the present.

By reframing the crisis in this way, it allows for more precise language. Because of the cultural nature of the crisis any discussion lacking this framework allows for multiple interpretations of the time frame. By setting up this framework multiple interpretations are still encouraged, without the lack of acknowledgment of the ongoing crisis.

Historiography

Despite heated anti-eroticism rhetoric during the pandemic, little has been written about it. The earliest writings were steeped in this rhetoric. Randy Shilts produced the first history of the crisis, *And The Band Played On: Politics, People, And the AIDS Epidemic*. Shilts’ journalism chronicled the unfolding crisis from 1976 to 1987, with an afterword that touches on 1988. So early on is this written that Shilts did not include ACT

³³ Julian Gill-Petersen, “Haunting the Queer Spaces of AIDS: Remembering ACT UP/New York and an Ethics for an Endemic,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 19 no. 3 (2013), 279-300.

UP, the iconic organization did not come together until 1987 and was not truly a contender until 1988. Within Shilts' anti-erotic rhetoric was a man named Gaetan Dugas. Dugas, erroneously labeled "patient zero," was all but blamed for the crisis by Shilts. If Dugas was not to blame for the crisis, it was, according to Shilts, men like him. "Gaetan was the man everyone wanted," Shilts began his introduction to Dugas, "the ideal for this community, at this time and in this place."³⁴ Shilts died in 1994 before definitive proof emerged that Dugas did not bring HIV to North America.³⁵ The constant rebuking of promiscuity, fisting, and other radical sex acts, however, set the tone for those following Shilts.

In 1983 John D'Emilio published *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States*. In this work D'Emilio argues that the sexual liberation of gay men and lesbians exists as a contradiction of two parts. First, homosexuality was shrouded in silence and, prior to the 1960s, there was no queer community. Secondly, that gay men and lesbians mobilized quickly and unexpectedly with the liberation movements of the sixties.³⁶ D'Emilio suggests that instead of either of those two parts, the homophile movement led by the Mattachine Society, of the post-World War II era, paved the way for the modern queer community. Rather than a singular event like the Stonewall Riots, what had to happen, and what the homophile

³⁴ Shilts, Randy. *And The Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 21.

³⁵ Despite the fact that science has come to "clear" Dugas's name, there should not have ever been a need to follow the patient zero rumor anyways. The 0 that Shilts and others misread was actually an o for "out of state." Anjali Tsui, "Scientists Debunk Myth that 'Patient Zero' Brought AIDS to America." *Frontline*, PBS, 28 October 2016. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/scientists-debunk-myth-that-patient-zero-brought-aids-to-america/>

³⁶ John D'Emilio, *Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 2-3.

movement did, was help gay men and women see themselves as an oppressed minority rather than individuals who had something wrong with them.³⁷ D’Emilio does not offer any analysis on the place of the new leather community in his analysis.

John-Manuel Andriote’s *Victory Deferred: How AIDS Changed Gay Life in America*, published in 1999, furthers Randy Shilts anti-eroticism rhetoric. Unlike *And the Band Played On*, *Victory Deferred* is not a chronicle of events but rather a historical analysis. Andriote argues there was no national gay community until the AIDS Crisis brought gay folks together into a true *community*.³⁸ This claim only works by ignoring first D’Emilio’s work and second how mainstream gay AIDS activism blamed men who practiced radical sexual acts for their own deaths. Andriote, moreover, seems to see two gay communities, one made up of white men and one made up of men of color. Boldly, he claims that his work will “rankle those who insist on particular points of view, or “political correctness” even when they contravene the facts.”³⁹ This use of the term “political correctness” is also used by Shilts as a way to signal a feeling of defiance in their anti-eroticism rhetoric.

The history of activism in these early years can be described by two authors. David France in *How to Survive a Plague: The Inside Story of How Citizens and Science Tamed AIDS* and Sarah Shuman’s *Let The Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP New York 1987-1993*. These two authors take very different approaches to the activism of the pandemic. France’s book, which came out first, praises ACT UP as having helped end “the plague.” The picture France paints of ACT UP is one of white gay men colluding

³⁷ D’Emilio, *Sexual Communities*, 4.

³⁸ Andriote *Victory Deferred*, 2.

³⁹ Andriote, xii-xiii.

with scientists to end AIDS. “But there was no denying that the plague was done,” he writes in his epilogue.⁴⁰ It is this historical narrative that Sarah Schulman wrote against. In the note to readers Shulman tells her readers that AIDS is not over, citing more than a thousand deaths in New York City alone.⁴¹ The first chapter of *Let The Record Show* focuses on the Puerto Ricans in ACT UP, a way of, immediately, establishing that ACT UP was not made up entirely of white men. Nor were those white men the most effective arm of the organization. Shulman shows how the diversity of ACT UP aided in its successes. These two books take two very different views on ACT UP and the AIDS crisis as a whole and represent a spectrum of the historiography on the activism of the time.

Other scholars of HIV/AIDS and sex worked to understand the intertwined cultural meaning of HIV and Sex. In 1990 Susan Sontag published *AIDS and its Metaphors*, a follow-up to her work *Illness as Metaphor*. Both works follow the ways society places metaphors on illness, and more problematically, uses illness as a metaphor to remove healthy ways of dealing with illness.⁴² In *Illness as a Metaphor* she used cancer as a replacement for tuberculosis. In *AIDS and its Metaphors*, Sontag argued that society needs to have sick victims to blame, and so, AIDS took the place of cancer.⁴³ Unlike cancer, however, AIDS took up the metaphor of a plague, a biblical kind of

⁴⁰ David France, *How to Survive a Plague: The Inside Story of How Citizens and Science Tamed AIDS*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016), 511.

⁴¹ Sarah Schulman, *Let The Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP in New York 1987-1993*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021), xi.

⁴² Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and its Metaphors*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1990), 3.

⁴³ Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and its Metaphors*, 104.

judgment on mankind, which required sexual transmission.⁴⁴ Sontag's interrogation of the meaning of AIDS is quite narrow. Other scholars have looked for a larger cultural meaning of AIDS.

In her 1999 work, *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic: Cultural Chronicles of AIDS*, Paula A. Treichler placed AIDS in a cultural and linguistic context rather than purely a biological and biomedical context, she puts practice against theory.⁴⁵ Treichler described the ways in which AIDS is not just something caused by the HIV virus but has a place in cultural studies as much more than a medical phenomenon.

One of the most recent relevant non-historic works for this thesis is Oliver Davis and Tim Dean's 2022 work, *Hatred of Sex*. Davis and Dean argue that in society there exists an intense hatred of sex which has removed "every deplorable element," leaving only "occasional or infrequent sex in the context of a long-term secure amative, initiate, emotionally rich, age-appropriate, and marriage-like relationship."⁴⁶ The hatred of sex does not sit firmly in the heterosexual camp. In fact the hatred of sex allows room for sex between two men or two women *so long as* it operates in a "marriage-like relationship." This allows for gay men to take part in the hatred of sex.

Davis and Dean's theory of sex hatred is foundational in understanding anti-eroticism. Shilts, and Kramer's support of sex only in the specific formula laid out by Davis and Dean is what leads them to write off radical sex completely. This is explored in chapters two and three, as the pandemic runs through their community these

⁴⁴ Sontag, 148.

⁴⁵ Paula A Treichler, *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic: Cultural Chronicles of AIDS*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 1-2.

⁴⁶ Oliver Davies and Tim Dean, *Hatred of Sex*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2022), 29.

two men rely on their hatred of sex to explain what is happening, and more disastrously, to suggest solutions.

In 1987 MIT published *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism* as an installment of their *October* books. Two of the collected essays are of particular importance to this thesis: Leo Bersani's "Is the Rectum a Grave" and Douglas Crimp's "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic." Both works laid the foundation for works like Oliver Davis and Tim Dean's *Hatred of Sex*, describing the ways in which the fact that AIDS is sexually transmitted, and affected gay men most visibly played an important role to the ways in which different pieces of society viewed the pandemic.

Bersani's essay shows the ways in which heterosexual society sees AIDS as a means of description similar to the way heterosexual society saw women as having an unquenchable need for destruction through sex because of the perceived link of syphilis and sex workers.⁴⁷ Bersani believes the answer to this link of sex and destruction is proof for monogamy among gay men, but he does not suggest this lightly, "gay men should ceaselessly lament the practical necessity, now, of such relationships, should resist being drawn into mimicking the unrelenting warfare between men and women, which nothing has ever changed."⁴⁸ Bersani is not the only gay man who sees monogamy as the answer to the pandemic. Unlike many of the others, however, he seeks to resist the heteronormativity that accompanies monogamy.

Douglas Crimp's essay wrote against the perceived necessity of monogamy. He names Larry Kramer and Randy Shilts as men who were pushing monogamy with an

⁴⁷ Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, (Winter, 1987), 211.

⁴⁸ Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" 218.

agenda. Crimp argues that Kramer and Shilts rely on the amorphous idea of “common sense” to promote heteronormative ideas of monogamy.⁴⁹ Kramer and Shilts take up "community values" which, Crimp argues, is actually just moralizing, Crimp instead wishes that men who preached community values preached the values of affected communities, rather than those of some unknowable, untouchable moral community.⁵⁰ Crimp's essay is of particular importance because the men criticized as being heteronormative and moralizing, are the men that make up the bulk of this thesis. It is not possible to untangle Kramer's and Shilts' anti-eroticism from their desire for homonormativity.

This thesis draws on these theoretical frameworks to emphasize anti-eroticism of mainstream AIDS activism during the AIDS pandemic. Further this thesis will suggest, through the examination of the gay leather community's AIDS activism, anti-eroticism was not necessary to minimize the risk of AIDS. This will be done in three chapters.

The first chapter lays a theoretical groundwork for the leather community. First by examining the relationship leathermen have with masculinity, and in turn the relationship of masculinity and eroticism. Then by describing the historic roots of the leather community, this chapter foregrounds later discussion of the leather community. It also furthers an understanding of the tie between radical sex and eroticism.

The second chapter will explore 1970s anti-eroticism rhetoric. The Stonewall Riots of 1969 ushered in an era of queer liberation. There were two primary benefactors of this liberation. The first was the leather community, which had established itself at

⁴⁹ Douglas Crimp, “How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic,” *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, (Winter, 1987), 247.

⁵⁰ Crimp, “How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic,” 266.

least a decade earlier, but saw an explosion of the community and culture nationwide. The second was the much looser community of “clones,” so named because they all dressed alike. These men spent their time “cruising” the streets of gay neighborhoods looking for sex from other men. It is in this context that two books, which make up the bulk of this chapter’s discussion, were published. John Rechy’s 1977 *The Sexual Outlaw: A Documentary* and Larry Kramer’s 1978 novel *Faggots*. Though no one knew it at the time, these books ushered in the end of an era of queer sexual liberation.

Rechy’s work fictionalized his life as a hustler in the cruising fast lane. Despite his praise for promiscuous gay men, Rechy aimed harsh words at those practicing other radical sex acts. Despite his condemnation of fisting, and anything with a little power dynamic to it, *The Sexual Outlaw* came to be read as the type of radical narrative Kramer wrote against in *Faggots*. Kramer’s *Faggots* reads like a tell-all of the gay underground. It is a denunciation of anything but monogamous, normative sex. It proved an incredibly divisive novel. Analysis of these two books, and the reactions in both the gay and mainstream press, will make up the bulk of this chapter. The rest of the chapter will put these books in the wider context of anti-eroticism that was happening around the gay community, as well as the fight of some feminists and some lesbians against pornography and SM. These together will lay the groundwork for the discussion of anti-eroticism during the crisis.

Chapter Three looks at mainstream gay depictions of the pandemic and how mainstream activism expanded upon the anti-eroticism of Kramer and Rechy. In narratives like Randy Shilts’ *And the Band Played On*, *anti-eroticism* is at the center.

Readers were supposed to see his firm stance against bathhouses as advocating for the use of condoms. Because of the nature of the crisis, the 100% death rate, poor information, and a slow medical response, grief, anger, and fear were the driving emotions of the gay community. Shilts however was not the only one with anti-eroticism rhetoric. Larry Kramer's article "1112 and Counting" and his play *The Normal Heart* both written about the crisis throw justified anger not at those refusing to help but at vulnerable members of the community.

Chapter Four steps away from mainstream activism to examine the response of the leather and fisting communities during the crisis. This chapter aims to show anti-eroticism was not the only reaction to the pandemic. When the leather and fisting communities came together to fundraise, they did so in ways that emphasized the erotic notions of their communities. Leather contests and slave auctions were common. Understanding that gay men were not going to give up having sex, members of radical sex communities worked to eroticize safer sex, giving men a "how to" guide. Finally, more than any other community, radical sex communities were focused on education. Prior to the pandemic, the leather community was committed to making sure that leathermen were practicing SM safely. When the pandemic set in, both the leather and fisting communities simply added more types of education; condoms and rubber gloves became equipment like any other safety gear. Taken in total this thesis provides hope in this new era of the AIDS endemic.

Throughout the whole thesis the words of gay men are prioritized. This means that non-academic, sometimes even self-published histories written by gay men about

their time in these communities are valued primary sources. The author made a single archival visit to The Leather Archive and Museum in Chicago, Illinois. Two leathermen, Chuck Renslow and Tony DeBlase, founded this community archive which serves leather, fetish, kink, and BDSM communities across sexualities. Centering history produced by those at the center of this project over other more orthodox sources is in keeping with the main thrust of this thesis, community.

When asked what he would say to new leathermen, 1996's International Mr. Leather Joe Gallagher told men to go to leather events, to learn the culture, and "love hard, but love!"⁵¹ This project cannot undo the harm of anti-eroticism rhetoric, nor does this project seek to condemn past reason those who pushed anti-eroticism rhetoric. For too long, too many people were dying and no one outside the communities affected cared. Who among us could swear we would not cause accidental harm in such a situation? Instead, the author hopes that by illuminating such rhetoric lessons will be learned and these communities will not repeat these mistakes.

⁵¹ Fred Michmerschuizen, "An Interview with International Mr. Leather," *Newslink*, Winter 1996-1997. GMSMA Papers, Leather Archive and Museum, Chicago, IL.

**ONE: “PUT ON A BODY, SHOW ME A FACE:” THEORIES AND
EROTICIZATION OF LEATHER MASCULINITY**

I wake up cold, I who
Prospered through dreams of heat
Wake to their residue,
Sweat and a clinging sheet

My flesh was its own shield:
Where it was gashed, it healed.
“The Man with Night Sweats” by Thom Gunn

In his 1982 poem *The Menace*, Leatherman Thom Gunn implored his readers to “come out of your hiding place, put on a body, show me a face.”⁵² Inviting readers into a leather bar, Gunn first asked them to get dressed, in leather and then settle their face into the hardened attitude of a leatherman. This image is a particular performance of masculinity that invites interrogation. Using primary sources produced by the leather and SM communities, publications, and memoirs, alongside theories of gender and sexuality by R.W. Connell and Judith Butler, this chapter seeks to show the limitations of Connell's early theories of masculinity. After the limitations of Connell are made clear this chapter will delve into the eroticism of masculinity by leathermen, and the ways in which Jack Halberstam's theorizing in *Female Masculinity* might shed light on possible theorizations of leather masculinity. This theoretical grounding allows for an understanding of the eroticization that leathermen participated in. This eroticization is the basis of the response leathermen had to the AIDS pandemic.

⁵² Thom Gunn, *The Menace*, (San Francisco: ManRoot, 1982).

Though the first leather bar opened in 1958, and the leather community can trace its roots to the veterans of World War II who came back to America used to wearing leather and having gay sex.⁵³ The community did not take off until the 1960s and was not overly popular until the 1970s. By the 1980s, the leather community was an established presence within the queer community. The beginning of the AIDS crisis saw an explosion of intra-community fighting initiated in the 1970s surrounding the place of sex, particularly promiscuity and sadomasochism. While gay men were dying, the community looked towards leathermen, and the communities closely related as the problem. Unlike the even older drag community, which has also seen its fair share of backlash, it is hard to think of a gay community that has felt as much heat from members of the queer community as leathermen. The exception, perhaps being their sisters, leather lesbians. This unique relationship with the rest of the gay community suggests a unique understanding of masculinity, different from the clones populating Castro and Christopher Street and undoubtedly different from those gay men who wish for nothing more than assimilation into the dominant heterosexual culture.

The Anatomy of a Leather Man

In order to analyze leather masculinity, one must begin with the leatherman. A leatherman is a gay man who identifies as part of the gay leather community. There are two critical points of this definition, the first being the gay male leather community. At present an incredibly large leather community exists of people of all genders and sexualities. The gay leather community is a subsection (and, in fact, the oldest piece) of

⁵³ Mark Thompson, "Introduction," *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice*, (Los Angeles: Daedalus Publishing Company, 2004), xviii

this community. It is in the gay male leather community, away from heterosexual leatherfolk and leather lesbians, where leather masculinity will be analyzed. The leather masculinity performed by some leather lesbians is worth analyzing but is outside the scope of this thesis. Second, self-identification is vital in order to keep from getting caught up in decades-old arguments about whether a gay leatherman must wear leather or must participate in particular sex acts.⁵⁴ This chapter primarily uses popular literature published by leathermen during the 1970s and early 1980s to describe the experience of leathermen. These community-based definitions lend authority to the discussion.

The leather world of the 1950s and 1960s is shrouded in mysticism passed down from one leather generation to the next. The myth of the Old Guard, a leather community bound by strict protocol and hierarchy, weaves its way through the conversation of leathermen even today, the topic often being the very existence of this community.⁵⁵ The reality of this romantic community of leathermen, accompanied by a motorcycle for each man out front and smoky back rooms, is of little concern. Rather what is important is the existence of the leather community, high protocol or not, can be traced back to the mid 1950s. The steady growth of the community from the 1950s through the sexual liberation of the 1960s saw an explosion in the 1970s when leathermen became a recognizable staple in an increasingly visible queer community.

Leathermen took their look from the motorcycle renegade, an archetype that entered the mainstream with Marlon Brando's performance in the 1953 movie *The Wild*

⁵⁴ Here gay will be dropped, and leatherman will describe only gay leatherman; if heterosexual leathermen are at issue, the author will make clear who the subject is.

⁵⁵ Guy Baldwin, "The Old Guard: Classical Leather Culture Revisited" *International Leatherman* 20, 1998. <https://leatherati.com/the-old-guard-classical-leather-culture-revisited-4fdc796aa25>

One. Brando's character Johnny Strabler is the leader of the Black Rebels Motorcycle Club. This motorcycle club goes from town to town causing trouble. Brando and his gang, unlike the rival The Beetles, dress in what eventually becomes the leatherman uniform: black leather jackets, Levi jeans, held up by thick leather belts, and of course black leather boots. Johnny's cloth military style cap resembles the iconic leather muir cap.⁵⁶

A year after the movie's release gay men founded the Satyrs Motorcycle Club in Los Angeles, California. This motorcycle club, the first gay motorcycle club in America, was founded just four years after the first sustained gay rights organization, the Mattachine Society.⁵⁷ Satyrs MC remains active today making it the longest running gay organization in the United States. Not a direct result of *The Wild One*, Satyrs MC was one of two important milestones for the leather community in the 1950s. In 1958 Chuck Renslow opened *The Gold Coast* in Chicago, the nation's first leather bar. These two spaces, clubs and bars, would become the foundation of the leather community, giving leathermen places to gather to meet men, and a community to lean on.

When describing the post war leather scene of the 1950s, Leatherman Thom Magister relied on the idea of an Old Guard. Composed of veterans of World War II, angry and feeling as if they could never return home, these men built a community where "the worlds of S/M, leathermen and leather-biker men were intertwined."⁵⁸ Magister's

⁵⁶ Laslo Benedek, *The Wild One*, Columbia Pictures, 1953.

⁵⁷ Thompson, "Introduction," xix.

Interestingly after some of the original members of the Mattachine society left the organization they joined the Satyrs.

⁵⁸ Thom Magister, "One Among Many: the Seduction and Training of a Leatherman," *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice*, (Los Angeles: Daedalus Publishing Company, 2004), 97.

tale of the leather scene of the 1950s is ripe with the romanticism of The Old Guard. “One glaring difference between leathermen in the 1950s and leather men of [the 1990s]” he notes is that “What S/M now call *play* we called *work*. And when I am inclined to criticize the current style of S/M I have made the observation that children play and men work.”⁵⁹ Whether Magister’s account is indicative of an elite now gone leatherman or not, it seems to be, at its heart, generational bickering and a change in the way leathermen understand their relationship to one another. Magister relies on the idea that the topman is performing *labor* when he works over his bottom, as opposed to a topman who views sex as leisure. He goes on to complain about hanky code, and even more laid-back flagging systems like keys or handcuffs worn on belt loops, as moving too fast. What Magister gets at though is a small tight knit community, leathermen mingling not only with gay bikers, but straight ones as well, simply because that is who was around in the 1950s. By the end of the decade, this tight knit community was on the verge of explosion.

In 1964, a decade after the establishment of the Satyrs MC, the leather community was introduced to the heterosexual population. An article titled “Homosexuality in America” in the June 26 *LIFE* magazine, opened with a two-page photograph of the inside of San Francisco’s most famous leather bar, The Tool Box. In the foreground, men dressed in leather jackets and tight jeans; behind them was a mural of leathermen done by Leatherman and artist Chuck Arnett. The author of the article described the leathermen as “These brawny young men in their leather caps, shirts, jackets and pants, are practicing homosexuals, men who turn to other men for affection and sexual satisfaction.” the article

⁵⁹ Magister, “One Among Many,” 98.

begins.⁶⁰ This was perhaps a revelation to heterosexuals, that these masculine men could be gay. This was not new information for gay men. The presence of masculine gay men had allowed for enough men to gather to be photographed at the Tool Box after all. The presence of masculine gay men was a common enough occurrence in the gay community that Leatherman and poet Thom Gunn filled his poetry with the masculine love of masculine men. In his 1961 poem, "Modes of Pleasure," Thom describes two men seeing each other at a leather bar coming together in order that they might spend the night together.

“Which as good humored muscle may
 Against the muscle try its strength
 — Exhausted into sleep at length —
 And will not last long into the day.”⁶¹

The passage speaks to a kind of sex which eroticizes strength and a fight, a dominant narrative of leather literature as the community grows. This love of masculinity, and strength, continued to grow. Jack Fritscher, Leatherman and author, credited *LIFE Magazine*'s article in helping the community grow. “Thousands of queers in small towns who thought that they were the only faggots in the world, and worse, thought that all faggots were queenly... suddenly saw, compliments of *Life*, that there was an alternative homomuscular style.”⁶² Rural readers of *Life* joined the flood of gay men who arrived in

⁶⁰ “Homosexuality in America,” *LIFE*, 26 June 1964.

⁶¹ Thom Gunn, “Modes of Pleasure,” *Collected Poems*, 102,

⁶² Jack Fritscher, “Artist Chuck Arnett: His Life/Our Times,” *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice* (Los Angeles: Daedalus Publishing, 2004), 107.

droves to cities like San Francisco, Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles, and they helped usher in the “golden age” of leather.⁶³

One of the best introductions to the “golden age” of leather is the opening chapter of Geoff Mains’ *Urban Aboriginals: A Celebration of Leathersexuality*. Mains documented California’s late 1970s and early 1980s leather community. Setting the stage for the rest of his work, Mains describes the men at a leather bar in San Francisco called Ambush. He writes:

The bar is close and cave-like, and its inhabitants have acquired a reflex response to movement between darkness and sunlight. Crowded in thick and resinous air are the images of the California mythos: biker, trucker, miner, and mountain man. Nearly all have facial hair. Most of the hair is short, and the beards well-trimmed, but some have long hair, loose or in ponytails, and with huge bushy beards: hippie bikers out of Marin or Mendocino. Also, a disheveled few in the style of the renegade biker. Most of the men are white, but some are Latinos, some Asians, and half a dozen Blacks; most share the same images. Nearly all of the men wear some article of leather, largely black biker jackets. A few wear chaps or leather pants. The fortune of the Levi-Strauss corporation continues to be made in bars like the Ambush.⁶⁴

The clothing and grooming is not where the look of a leatherman stops for Mains; it is also how one carries himself:

Here, like those of the earlier age, the men are tough, hard and self-confident. But they are also much more secure in themselves. There is a little rivalry, perhaps, in the friendliest way, and there is a little game-playing. But there is virtually no dissension. As the crowd drinks and smokes, it mellows. This is no place for the obnoxious or for those intent on proving superiority. Masculinity is a known, unquestioned fact. It is embraced by a gentleness and a sense of affection that pervades the crowd. Arms circle one another. Men kiss and touch while they talk. Still, others grope butt or crotch or talk dirty. Some depart to play.⁶⁵

⁶³ Depending on who is answering the question the Golden Age of leather ran from about 1972 to 1982. The characteristics of the Golden Age of leather are the plethora of leather bars and general hedonism of gay men prior to the AIDS pandemic.

Baldwin, “The Old Guard.” 1992.

⁶⁴ Geoff Mains, *Urban Aboriginals: A Celebration of Leathersexuality* (Los Angeles: Daedalus Publishing Company, 2002), 21

⁶⁵ Mains, *Urban Aboriginals*, 21.

Right away, Mains shows the difficulties with leather masculinity. Leathermen, have a *look*. Mains allow for a deviation of that look, hippies, and other men with long hair; this was not an allowance other authors see fit to give. However, more important is the acknowledgment of gentleness and affection. This particular intersection of gentleness and affection alongside masculine presentation gives leathermen a unique masculinity. The presentation of hypermasculinity and emotional vulnerability sit at two opposite ends of masculinity theory.

A more humorous example of this contrast is presented by Michael Bronski in his contribution to the anthology *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice*, "A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes: Notes on the Materialization of Sexual Fantasy." In a discussion about masculinity and gay liberation, a "very politically correct" man suggested that leathermen try to pass as straight men. A lesbian responds, "Give me a *break*. You think that someone wearing chaps, a black leather jacket, a motorcycle cap, handcuffs on his belt, two different color hankies, and 36-inch-high black boots looks *Straight!*"⁶⁶ This is precisely what is at stake with leather masculinity; it is, on the one hand, an incredibly masculine and perhaps hyper-masculine presentation of gender; it is also an undeniably queer presentation of gender. This tension will make leather masculinity challenging to fit into any popular masculinity theory.

In addition to the look of the leatherman, the venue of the leatherman is essential. Mains introduced the most popular, the leather bar. The leather bar, alongside leather clubs, play parties, and runs —camping trips put on by leather clubs— are the venue of

⁶⁶ Michael Bronski, "A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes: Notes on the Materialization of Sexual Fantasy," in *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice*, edited by Mark Thompson, (Los Angeles: Daedalus Publishing Company, 2004), 61.

the leatherman. In what is perhaps the most well-loved of all leather literature, *The Leatherman's Handbook*, author Larry Townsend tells new leathermen that the best place to find other leathermen is at the bar.⁶⁷ While other gay men looked for sexual partners on the street (a practice called cruising which had its own social rules), leathermen headed to bars that catered to their taste. This subtle difference holds a world of implications; Leather masculinity is best performed in the presence of other leathermen.

When taking up the task of writing a history of the leather community of the 1970s, Gayle Rubin described a particular private SM club in San Francisco, The Catacombs. The main activity which took place in The Catacombs was fisting, the act of inserting one's hand and forearm into the anal or vaginal cavity of a partner. The necessity of being on the owner's list allowed for a "situation that was insulated, as much as possible, from the curious and hostile."⁶⁸ This insulation, enforced in the case of the Catacombs by a list, allows for the performance of leather masculinity to be done only in the presence of a receptive audience. While not all leather spaces had membership lists, there were other ways of maintaining the audience of leather masculinity. Townsend, when advising new leathermen, suggested that a masculine look is the best, but there were some restrictions. A leatherman should avoid wearing tennis shoes or a sweater, or he would have no luck at the bars.⁶⁹ This self-regulation, leathermen not picking up men who do not fit the look of a leatherman, policed the audience of leather masculinity and

⁶⁷ Larry Townsend, *The Leatherman's Handbook*, (San Francisco: Le Salon, 1972),103.

⁶⁸ Gayle Rubin, "The Catacombs: A Temple of the Butthole," in *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice*, edited by Mark Thompson, (Los Angeles: Daedalus Publishing Company, 2004), 119.

⁶⁹ Townsend, *The Leatherman's Handbook*, 106.

the boundaries of the community. It insured, as much as possible, that those who saw leather masculinity are going to be receptive to it.

Leathermen, of course, existed outside of these spaces. Leather bars do not spontaneously create leathermen; they must travel to and from the bars. Either on motorcycles or on the subway, it is inevitable that leathermen could not always control those who see their gendered performance. However, this chapter is not interested in these encounters because those who see a leatherman on the bus, or walking down the block, are rarely the *target* audience. They are an audience, but the leathermen did not curate the performance with them in mind.

A final and vital aspect of leather masculinity, alongside the "uniform" described by Mains, is that by the mid-70s leathermen had developed ways in which to communicate their sexual preference with each other without speaking, flagging. Townsend describes the most basic of these systems, left vs. right, to signal the "active" vs. the "passive" sexual positions. The location of a man's keys was the most common example of this. Townsend says worn on the left; it was a signal of a man looking to "top," and worn on the right it signaled a man looking to "bottom."⁷⁰ Leathermen made this system more complex with the introduction of the hanky code. Leather lore claims that in 1972 Alan Selby, founder of the iconic Mr. S Leather franchise, once received an order of handkerchiefs that was much too large and far too colorful. In order to sell the product, he and a friend sat down and decided to use the left vs. right system and add meaning to each color of handkerchief. Worn in the left back pocket, the handkerchief

⁷⁰ Townsend, 107.

meant a man was looking to do a particular sex act to a partner and worn on the right it meant a man was looking to have that sex act done to him.⁷¹ The original hanky code included dark blue, meaning "Greek passive" or "Greek active." Red meant fister/fistee, and green indicated either a man was selling sex or looking to buy sex. Alongside a handful of other colors, these signals allowed leathermen to cruise bars with ease.⁷² Rather than relying on stereotypes about who might be interested in which sexual activity, flagging kept the aesthetic of leather masculinity consistent. By consistently enforcing leather masculinity with the use of codes, the community policed who was and was not part of the community.

These three things, the aesthetic, the venue, and flagging, are at the core of the 1970s leatherman. Though it does not scratch the surface of a vibrant culture, this foundation is wide enough to build a theoretical framework on top of it.

Understanding What Makes a Man

The theoretical framework of masculinity will rest on the work of two individuals, R. W. Connell and Judith Butler, the former more than the latter. At the end of this section will be a discussion of hybrid masculinities. Connell's work is useful because it explains the ways in which different masculinities are related to power structures. By understanding this leather masculinity can be put into a larger structural context. Butler's work is useful to understand how gender performance works and will illuminate the methods by which leathermen are able to express their masculinity depending on the

⁷¹ Jordy Jones *The Mayor of Folsom Street*, Springfield: Fair Page Media LLC, 2017, 12.

⁷² The Hanky Code has expanded since it was first adopted. In the fall of 1988, *The Leather Journal*, an unaffiliated publication meant to bring together the gay leather community, "announced" that the Hanky Code would expand to specifically include a handkerchief to denote wearers were looking for safer sex. A black and white checkered handkerchief.

audience around them. In *Masculinities*, Connell lays out four specific types of masculinity: hegemonic, marginalized, complicit, and subordinate. Hegemonic masculinity refers to the masculinity which legitimizes the patriarchy; it is the dominant form of masculinity though a majority of men might not express it.⁷³ Marginalized masculinity is the masculinity of men of different classes or races from the hegemonic masculine ideal.⁷⁴ These masculinities will play a role in the larger analysis of leather masculinity but are not as important as the last two. Complicit masculinity is a form of masculinity that, while not actively pursuing hegemonic masculinity, benefits from hegemonic masculinity.⁷⁵ Subordinate masculinity is the most relevant of Connell's four masculinities. Subordinate masculinity equates gayness with femininity through the partner's masculine identity and receptive anal pleasure.⁷⁶ However, it is not just gay men who are subject to subordinate masculinity; some heterosexual men and boys are also subject to subordinate masculinity.⁷⁷ The most important implication of this is that by allowing that some straight men have subordinate masculinity, then some gay men must not have subordinate masculinity. While Connell's four types of masculinities are critical to their work, there is a second piece that is just as important.

Next to Connell, this chapter looks at Judith Butler's "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" to understand how one comes to a place where society can label someone with particular masculinities. Butler argues that to define oneself as something,

⁷³ R. W. Connell. *Masculinities*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 77.

⁷⁴ Connell, *Masculinities*, 80-81.

⁷⁵ Connell, 79.

⁷⁶ Connell, 78-79.

⁷⁷ Connell, 79.

they necessarily define themselves against something else.⁷⁸ This defining of the "I," which in Butler's essay is that of a lesbian, is only a lesbian through repeated "play" or performance of lesbianism; as soon as the play stops, the lesbian disappears.⁷⁹ The performance of gender must happen over and over, and thus for an audience; as soon as the play is over, or when the audience is gone, the gender that was, no longer exists.

Finally comes the idea of hybrid masculinities. Proposed by Tristan Bridges and CJ Pascoe, the basis of the argument regarding hybrid masculinities is incorporating marginalized and subordinate masculinities by those with privileged masculinities. One can do this in three ways. Discursive distancing puts distance between the new masculinity and the subordinate or marginalized masculinity. Strategic borrowing is where the new masculinity "borrows" a trait from subordinate or marginalized masculinity. Finally, fortifying boundaries digs deeper into systems of inequality along the lines of subordinate or marginalized masculinities. These new hybrid masculinities *seem* to change how power is structured while not changing the power structure.⁸⁰ Hybrid masculinities, however, only work one way; they are privileged masculinities using subordinate or marginalized masculinities to trick the perception of gendered power.

These theories of masculinity and gender make up the basis of the field of masculinity studies. What will become clear is that academics did not build this field with the ability to analyze communities like the leather community.

⁷⁸ Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, edited by Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin. (New York: Routledge, 1993), 309.

⁷⁹ Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," 311.

⁸⁰ Tristan Bridges, C. J. Pascoe. "Hybrid Masculinities: New Directions in the Sociology of Men and Masculinity." In *Sociology Compass* 2014. 246-258.

Leather Masculinity Theorized

This section of the chapter combines the previous two sections, an understanding of the presentation of leathermen and theories of masculinity and reads them together in hopes of understanding leather masculinity. Combining these gender theories while simultaneously applying them to leathermen will expose how Connell, Bridges, and Pascoe come up short in their ability to describe leather masculinity.

Beginning with Butler's "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," is the concept of definitions necessarily opposite to that which it is not. For Butler, this meant that a lesbian only makes sense insofar as there also was something that was *not* a lesbian, specifically heterosexual women. In this case, then, leathermen must define themselves against something which they are not. There is a historic precedent for the opposite of a leatherman to be a drag queen. Drag communities are one of the only queer communities older than leather communities.⁸¹ Further, where drag queens are the embodiment of femininity, leathermen are the embodiment of masculinity. In 1983 a reader of *Drummer* wrote to the magazine complaining that drag queens were giving *real* gay men a bad name because of their femininity.⁸² So far, the oppositionality tracks, except the crux of Butler requiring an "I" to be defined against that which it is not, is that the "I" could not exist if not for its opposite. Here are the similarities between them. While it is true that there are no heterosexual women if there are no lesbians and vice versa, it is not true that

⁸¹ By the 1920s Drag Balls were common in New York City. George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 2.

⁸² RG, "Malecall" *Drummer*, Issue 62 1983. Incidentally, the editor wrote back in the same issue giving his readers a history lesson, telling them they would not be where they were if it had not been for drag queens in New York. His response that leathermen have more in common with queens than other gay men shows how queens and leathermen are not the natural oppositions that they appear to be.

there are no drag queens if there are no leathermen. If every leatherman hung up his leather jacket and vowed never to wear his chaps again, drag queens would continue to exist. In this way, Butler does not help recognize leather masculinity, but that was never quite the purpose of this section of Butler's work. What is much more important is the later discussion about gender performance.

Butler argues that gender is a performance that happens only as long as the "I" performs. It has much more significant implications for leather masculinity. Specifically, leather masculinity only exists in places where leathermen act like leathermen, where they are wearing their gear and maybe cruising. Far more importantly, leather masculinity only exists where there is an audience for this performance. The Tool Box, one of San Francisco's first leather bars, is a venue for leather masculinity; there are performers and an audience. The supermarket, in contrast, is seldom a venue for leather masculinity; even if a performer is there, if there is no audience, then the performance falls flat. This distinguishes leather masculinity from other expressions of masculinity. For example, a "gym bro" might primarily see positive feedback on his masculinity in the gym. However, his masculinity is mainstream enough that those outside the gym will see the markers of his masculinity—the shaker bottle, the cut-off shirt—and become an audience for his gender. A leatherman, however, could just look like a man in a leather jacket, leather boots, and jeans standing next to the "gym bro." This limited audience has important implications for how Connell's theories of masculinity can be applied.

A leatherman in a leather bar cannot be said to have hegemonic masculinity or complicated masculinity. While leather masculinity is the dominant form of masculinity

in these spaces, to say that leather masculinity legitimizes the patriarchy would be to miss the mark. Connell theorized for this, though, acknowledging that dominant masculinity is not always hegemonic, and that hegemonic masculinity is not always the most dominant expression.⁸³ This is the easiest of Connell's masculinities to discuss due to their lack of relevance. First hybrid masculinity will be explored before moving on to subordinated and marginalized masculinity.

Hybrid masculinities fill the gap between complicit and hegemonic masculinities. Due to the incredible masculine appearance of leathermen, it would first appear that perhaps they are participating in a hybrid masculinity. However, it quickly becomes very clear that they are not. Hybrid masculinities take pieces of marginalized or subordinate masculinity and use them to express privileged masculinity. Leathermen have done no such thing and have done the inverse. The history of the leather community shows that the biker look is no accident. Leathermen took a dominant masculinity, the renegade biker, and repurposed it into something incredibly queer. Leather masculinity does, however, grant a leatherman privileged gender performance, again only when the audience for leather masculinity is present.

Connell's subordinate masculinity fails to explain leather masculinity because of the lack of diversity of gendered performance in leather spaces. This is notable for two reasons: the lack of stigma for those who participate in "receptive anal pleasure" and the complete lack of femininity.

⁸³ Connell, 77.

The "uniform" of a leatherman, the jacket, the boots, the jeans, puts every leatherman on a relatively even playing field. Unless one knows what to look for, it is impossible to tell who is looking to be the "top" and who is looking to bottom. The signs themselves are innocuous enough that even when one does know what to look for, it is hard to argue a difference in presentation. One of the oldest signs is wearing one's keys on their belt loops. The left would denote a leatherman looking to be the "top," the right side would signal a "bottom," and the middle shows a leatherman ready to negotiate this aspect with his partner.⁸⁴ The left/right system works for other things, handcuffs, earrings, floggers, and of course, this system is the basis of the hanky code. In addition to making a cruising leatherman's life easier, this flagging system eliminates the need for stereotypes. This is not to say that stereotypes do not exist in the leather community, but they hold less weight by their lack of necessity. Contrast this with the assumptions made by gay communities outside of leather bars regarding men who are "bottoms." An assumption, of course, which rests with Connell's theory of subordinate masculinity.

Moreover, the performance of leather masculinity denies the possibility of femininity. While leather masculinity might not be hegemonic in leather spaces, it is undoubtedly the dominant expression. The performance of leather masculinity is so tied to the audience that it almost necessitates the audience *to* be performing leather masculinity. If not leather masculinity, the hyper-masculine image of the "clone" might be adopted.⁸⁵ This lack of femininity, alongside the ways in which leathermen signal those

⁸⁴ Townsend, 107.

⁸⁵ The "Castro clone," an aesthetic that seems to have begun in the Castro neighborhood of San Francisco, found its way into the Village in New York and Boystown in Chicago. It was a hyper-masculine aesthetic that looked much like a leatherman without any leather. Levi 501s (one button always undone), work boots, and a tight t-shirt made up the uniform. Men used this look when cruising gay neighborhoods and, as such,

looking for "receptive anal pleasure," problematize the concept of subordinate masculinity, at least in leather spaces.

In theorizing subordinate masculinity, Connell suggests that there might be some gay men who are not subject to subordinate masculinity. What Connell does not say is that by necessity, if some non-gay men perform subordinate masculinity, then it must be true that some gay men do *not* perform subordinate masculinity. However, it must be so, and those gay men are the gay men performing leather masculinity. Subordinate masculinity rests on the fact that gay men *must* be feminine because their "receptive anal pleasure" is analogous to how a woman participates in heterosexual sex. This concept works very well outside of leather spaces and continues to work well in queer spaces where bottoms are presumed to be feminine or that feminine gay men are bottoms. This concept, however, does not stand up in leather spaces.

Eroticizing the Masculine and Possible Avenues of Theory

Jack Fritscher's 1969 novel, *Leather Blues*, is one of the first leather novels. First published as a zine and then later serialized in *Man2Man*, Fritscher's novel chronicles Denny Sargent's coming out into leather. Annoyed by his parents, Denny meets Sam lounging on his motorcycle outside a bar. Sam takes Denny out of town on the back of his motorcycle, a wild ride meant to get Denny to chicken out. Instead, Denny becomes enamored with Sam. "When you thought I said something to you, you yelled back *Yes* into my ear. Yes to what?" Sam asks after the motorcycle ride. "I guess *Yes anything.*" is

did not have such a tight audience as leather masculinity does. The commitment to a masculine look, however, made it easier for clones to fit into leather spaces. The look has gone almost extinct; it's the last hurrah as the uniform of the AIDS activist group ACT UP. Martin P. Levine. *Gay Macho: The Life and Death of the Homosexual Clone*. New York: New York University Press, 1998.

Denny's reply.⁸⁶ From there Sam and Denny wrestle, all while Sam has a cigar in his mouth, each time Sam thinks he does something that will finally result in Denny pulling back Denny answers yes. This goes on until Sam and Denny are too turned on to ignore it anymore. Dropping his pants, Sam asks Denny "You don't scare easy, do you kid?" to which Denny answers "A real man can take whatever a real man can hand out."⁸⁷ The rest of the story is Denny proving that he can do just that, take whatever Sam and his buddies can hand out.

Leather Blues offers a particular type of eroticization of masculinity, one that Fritscher above all others capitalized on. For Fritscher, an erotica author, the fantasy of leather masculinity is also the fantasy of expelling subordinate masculinity from his queerness. Returning to his article on leather in the 1960s, Fritscher heralded the *Life Magazine* article as an "Emancipation Proclamation" for "Non-Nelly faggots."⁸⁸ This way of talking about non-leathermen, particularly those who *do* have subordinate masculinity is not an uncommon theme. Most of the time men contain this to works meant to be erotic, or semi erotic. When discussing the issue of public or semi-public leather sex, Larry Townsend in *The Leatherman's Handbook* warns against the act if the members who might find out about the leathersex are not a mostly leather group.⁸⁹ The issue Townsend relates is that if the group of "marshmallows" or a "bevy of giggling

⁸⁶ Jack Fritscher, *Leather Blues: The Adventures of Denny Sargent*, (San Francisco: Palm Drive Publishing, 2011), 20.

⁸⁷ Fritscher, *Leather Blues*, 21.

⁸⁸ Fritscher, "Artist Chuck Arnette," 107.

⁸⁹ Public sex has a long standing place in the community, established as a pillar of the community long before the leather community. The act of cursing allows for ample opportunity as men are already soliciting sex in public. After being arrested for "Lewd Conduct" and coming out as gay Singer and former member of WHAM! George Michael writes "Outside" a song praising public sex.

queens" finds out that leathersex is happening, and of course they would if those participating are doing it right, they would view the leathersmen as animals in a zoo, and watch and laugh.⁹⁰ Fritscher and Townsend use the femininity of other gay men to prop up the masculinity of leathersmen in erotic (and for Fritscher, occasionally non-erotic) scenarios.⁹¹ The reliance on femininity to point to masculinity dies out as leather masculinity reaches its peak popularity in the 1970s. This only furthers the assertion that when a target audience exists, leathersmen fall outside Connell's theories of masculinity.

Rather than use femininity to eroticize masculinity, leathersmen of the 1970s and early 1980s simply reasserted their own and their brothers' masculinity. In one of his few overtly leather themed poems, *The Menace*, Thom Gunn explores this masculinity:

“We play at large
With the dull idea of the male
Strenuous in his limitations.
We play without deceit
Compressing Symbol into fetish,”⁹²

Gunn called this poem “the poem I have always wanted to write about leather bars, SM games, etc.”⁹³ His attempt to “release leather bars from the rather crude assumptions made about them by straight people, newspapers, and gays who have either never been in

⁹⁰ Larry Townsend, *The Leatherman's Handbook*, (San Francisco: Le Salon, 1977),203.

⁹¹ With the exception of Fritscher, the leather establishment eventually comes to take a stand against hatred of feminine men, particularly drag queens. In January 1983 when a leathersman wrote to *Drummer* to complain about feminine gay men giving “true” gay men a bad name the editor Robert Payne wrote back telling the man that leathersmen owed much to drag queens. Two months later in the April 1983 issue Payne was backed up by leathersmen writing in droves about their support for feminine gay men. “The most damaging discrimination against gays is not from the heterosexual community from our own gay brothers and sisters.” D. Coryell wrote into *Drummer* noting not only the way some leathersmen treat feminine men, but the inverse as well. This dialogue would never have happened when Fritscher was *Drummer's* editor.

⁹² Thom Gunn, *The Menace*, (San Francisco: ManRoot, 1982).

⁹³ Thom Gunn, to Douglas Chambers, 22 July 1980, *The Letters of Thom Gunn*, Edited by August Kleinzahler, Michael Nott, and Clive Wilmer, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2021), 355.

one or have only gone to one to find what they expect,” has done just that.⁹⁴ By "releasing" leather bars from assumptions, Gunn has had to describe the mechanics of leather masculinity. Similarly to the earlier quoted Gunn poem, there is a sense of fight, masculine strength against masculine strength. Here though Gunn suggests that leathermen, in their playing with this idea, have heightened it. The symbol of the fight has been turned in on itself "compressed" so that leathermen can eroticize it.

Leather masculinity as has been shown earlier in this chapter, does not exist outside leather spaces. What this in turn means, is that men can not properly eroticize leather masculinity outside of leather spaces. While this fact will prove useful in offering suggestions as to how to theorize leather masculinity, in the meantime it causes trouble in showing just how the "compression" of masculinity happens. To best show the ways in which leathermen eroticize masculinity in a particular way, a short detour to leathermen's hairier cousins bears will be instrumental.

Bears, a gay male subculture, has its roots in the 1970s but truly took off in the 1980s as the AIDS pandemic began taking its toll. Similarly, to leathermen there is no one way to go about being a bear. Often reduced to “fat hairy gay men,” the definitions of fat and hairy vary from bear to bear.⁹⁵ Second to the look of a bear is the attitude. A bear is often a man's man. Les Wright described a gathering of bears as "real men having a

⁹⁴ Thom Gunn to Gregory Woods, 2 October 1982, *The Letters of Thom Gunn*, edited by August Kleinzahler, Michael Nott, and Clive Wilmer, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2021), 377. In an odd twist of fate Gunn sent this letter to Woods who wrote a chapter of his thesis on the sadomasochistic implications of Gunn's poetry. Gunn found the chapter lacking and his poetry wildly misunderstood. The author hopes that should Gunn read this chapter from the great leatherbar in the sky he finds it more satisfactory.

⁹⁵ Les Wright, “Introduction: Theoretical Bears,” in *The Bear Book: Readings in the History and Evolution of a Gay Male Subculture*, edited by Les Wright, (New York: Harrington, 1997), 9.

hell of a good time without a woman in sight."⁹⁶ This look and attitude come together with a "uniform" of jeans, flannel shirts, and work boots.⁹⁷ The masculinity of bears might be said to mirror that of leathermen, they certainly both play into masculine tropes, bears relying even more heavily on class indicators of masculinity than leathermen. However, the masculinity of bears is not so contained as the masculinity of leathermen. Les Wright, founder and curator of the Bear History Project, has none of the same issues with bear masculinity and Connells work that arises with leathermen. "A bear is an identity in contrast to other homosexualities, with certain alliances or crossovers to hegemonic masculinity as well as with feminism."⁹⁸ To tie masculinity to both hegemonic masculinity and feminism is a bold move, one that seems to defy an understanding of Connell's work. It might be more accurate to label bear masculinity as a protest masculinity, regardless it is this tie to hegemonic masculinity that keeps the bear community from eroticizing bear masculinity in the same compressed way that leathermen do.

Bears are very proud of the ways in which they are masculine and able to slip in and out of straight society without much issue. The masculinity displayed is *supposed* to fit into straight society, and directly contrasts with femininity. Bear masculinity, and the ways bears talk about it, bears striking resemblance to the way early leather masculinity was talked about, this is, in large part, thanks to one of the most published authors in *BEAR* magazine, Jack Fritscher. Bear admirer Ned Wilkinson suggests that bears are

⁹⁶ Les Wright, "A Concise History of Self-Identifying Bears," In *The Bear Book: Readings in the History and Evolution of a Gay Male Subculture*, edited by Les Wright, (New York: Harrington, 1997), 25.

⁹⁷ Scott Hill, "Aroused from Hibernation," in *the Bear Book: Readings in the History and Evolution of a Gay Male Subculture*, edited by Les Wright, (New York: Harrington, 1997), 67.

⁹⁸ Wright, "Introduction," 7.

“simply fuzzy gay men who wanted to be seen as desirable.”⁹⁹ This group, usually situated next to leathermen, have done something that leathermen have not. They have de-queered their queer masculinity. Make no mistake, being gay is at the center of being a bear. However the emphasis on heteronormative masculinity de-queers the way in which bears interact with masculinity. While leathermen “compress the symbol into fetish,” bears do no such thing. The symbol is not turned in on itself at all, which then makes it unable to be eroticized.

The eroticization of leather masculinity is key for understanding this masculinity through the lens of Jack Halberstam’s *Female Masculinity*. Halberstam argues that masculinity only becomes legible when it leaves the “white male middle class body.”¹⁰⁰ This should present problems for the use of this theory as a lens into leather masculinity as it is performed primarily by white male middle class bodies. However what Halberstam is getting at is that masculinity is most legible at the margins. Specifically, he is speaking about butch lesbians, drag kings, and trans men. Leathermen, despite being primarily white male and middle class, exist on the margins as well. Leathermen are a minority by virtue of being gay, but they are also a minority in the larger gay community, often scorned by the larger non-leather pieces of the community.

⁹⁹ Ned Wiklinson, “A Bear Admirer’s (Subjective, Fluffy, and totally Honest) Point of View,” in *The Bear Book II: Further Readings in the History and Evolution of a Gay Male Subculture* edited by Les Wright, (New York: Harrington Press, 2001), 107.

Unlike the leather community, where the definition of community is so loose it includes all men who identify as leathermen. The Bear community proudly welcomes non-bear admirers into the community. While there are some guidelines on who is or is not a bear, the bear community welcomes many who fall outside those guidelines. The leather community resists those who admire but do not commit.

¹⁰⁰ Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, (Durham: Duke University press, 1998), 2.

What makes the margins an important place of investigation of masculinity is the inability of men, on the whole, to perform masculinity. Halberstam argues that drag kings cannot simply impersonate masculinity because masculinity is granted to men, and so drag kings have to use "campy" performances; they bring in pieces of femininity in order to make masculinity visible.¹⁰¹ Leathermen in leather spaces can hardly be said to be camp, they are in fact incredibly butch. However, because of their being gay, leathermen are not simply granted masculinity. Michael Bronski, a leatherman, contends that leathermen, "have not reiterated the tired old notions of what it means to be a man, we have invented a new mode of masculinity, a way to express ourselves, our fantasies, our desires."¹⁰² Bronski has presented the key: leathermen created a new mode of masculinity by tying leather masculinity to the eroticization of masculinity. The eroticization of masculinity, as described here is the performance which makes masculinity visible.

By looking at the eroticization of masculinity, and understanding it as the performance, the feedback loop of Butler's becomes even more clear. When a performance of masculinity, done for the purpose of being eroticized, is eroticized by the target audience the performance has been successful. Connell's theory is still lacking; however, by understanding leather masculinity as a performance with a very specific purpose, Halberstam's work presents a new direction for research.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined some of the most influential theories of gender and masculinity and attempted to use them to understand leather masculinity. In doing so,

¹⁰¹ Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 235.

¹⁰² Bronski, "A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes," 61.

there were a few limitations. First, this chapter works off the assumption that the leather community is "mostly white." The ways in which a black leather man experiences and performs leather masculinity are different from the white majority. Marginalized masculinity, specifically in the case of race, exceeds the scope of this chapter, but that does not make it less critical. The impact of class and marginalized masculinity would be another exciting investigation, particularly due to the price of leather gear, even just leather boots.

Despite these limitations, this chapter has shown the ways in which Connell's masculinities fall short in very specific instances. There is no need to eliminate Connell's theories; despite the shortcoming of subordinate masculinity in this instance, the theory holds in more instances than it fails. That does not mean the field must be content with that and nothing else. One can see the limits of subordinate masculinity by looking at other relatively closed gay subcultures, and, once found, new work can begin to theorize these particular instances of masculinity. Bears, fat hairy gay men, would be a place to begin this work. This group of men has similarly queered a masculine aesthetic but to a different effect by not being a specifically sexual subculture.

A second way to test the limits of subordinate masculinity would be to look at the ways in which non-leather gay men receive the performance of leather masculinity. One would be hard-pressed to find a gay man who looks and acts more masculine than a leatherman performing leather masculinity. The performance goes perfectly in spaces like leather bars. However, when the performance includes an audience of gay men who are *not* leathermen, for example, at a pride event, the performance goes much differently.

Due to many gay men buying into what Oliver Davis and Tim Dean theorize as the "hatred of sex," men who refuse to have monogamous non-kinky sex are seen as suspect.¹⁰³ The openness with which leathermen wear their sexuality leads to all kinds of pushback. In "Snapshots of Desire: Surviving as a Queer among Queers," Eric Rofes describes how his leather masculinity stood in the way of his integration into the larger queer community.¹⁰⁴ By looking at leather masculinity in this light, with this audience, one might find that at some points, leather masculinity *is* a subordinate gender due to perceived sex acts, despite the masculine image.

This masculine image does not save leathermen from their position as a marginalized group inside an already marginalized group. The eroticization, the heart of leather masculinity and the leatherman identity on the whole, is not shared by the community at large. As was seen with bears, it is sometimes not possible for men to access this same eroticism. It is the commitment to eroticism that sets leathermen apart from the mainstream community when the AIDS pandemic hits.

¹⁰³ Oliver Davis, and Tim Dean. *Hatred of Sex*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2022. The most famous instance of this is Larry Kramer's novel *Faggots*, where Kramer argues that those men who have promiscuous or kinky sex are uninterested and, in fact, unable to find love, which he moralizes is what every gay man should want.

¹⁰⁴ Eric E. Rofes. "Snapshots of Desire: Surviving as a Queer Among Queers." in *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice*. Edited by Mark Thomson. Los Angeles: Daedalus Publishing Company, 2004. 179-184.

**TWO: “THE WAGES OF GAY SIN” RECHY, KRAMER, AND THE
FOUNDATIONS OF GAY ANTI-EROTICISM**

“I grew as I explored
The body I could trust
Even while I adored
The risk that made robust,

A world of wonders in
Each challenge to the skin.”

“The Man with Night Sweats” by Thom Gunn

“Read anything by Kramer closely,” playwright Robert Chelsey wrote in 1981. “I think you’ll find that the subtext is always: the wages of gay sin is death.”¹⁰⁵ Chelsey criticized fellow playwright Larry Kramer’s 1981 plea for gay men to change the ways they lived in light of, though they did not know it by this name yet, HIV ravaging the New York gay community. Of the works that Chelsey referenced, the most notable was *Faggots*, Kramer’s debut novel. *Faggots*, along with *The Sexual Outlaw* by John Rechy, both played into dominant narratives written by feminists denouncing porn and sex. This morphed into a narrative of anti-eroticism built on a hatred of sex. The concept of hatred of sex used here is one laid out by Oliver Davis and Tim Dean in their book *Hatred of Sex*. “One expresses hatred of it by having sex in a particular way.”¹⁰⁶ Davis and Dean even lay out the parameters of this “particular way” of having sex: “occasional or infrequent sex in the context of a long-term, secure, amative, intimate, emotionally rich,

¹⁰⁵ Robert Chelsey, quoted in Gabriel Rotello’s “Kramer as Prophet” in *We Must Love One Another or Die: The Life and Legacies of Larry Kramer*. (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1999), 92.

¹⁰⁶ Oliver Davis and Tim Dean *Hatred of Sex*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2022), 29.

age-appropriate, and marriage-like relationship."¹⁰⁷ Although men like Kramer and Rechy dismissed SM, leather, and other radical sex as uncaring and unfeeling, the anti-eroticism in their work was a shallow understanding of the actual sex men are having. This hatred of sex evolved into the anti-eroticism of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

While the gay community used anti-eroticism rhetoric, it was much more present in the lesbian and feminist communities, particularly in the form of anti-pornography arguments. The most influential work that utilized this rhetoric was Andrea Dworkin's *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*. Published in 1981 Dworkin argued that the issue of pornography was not whether or not pornography is protected free speech, but whether or not the existence of pornography keeps women from exercising their own first amendment right, which she contends is what happens.¹⁰⁸ This assertion rested on the claim that pornography is "the graphic depiction of whores," and there is no other possible definition.¹⁰⁹ Dworkin's argument rests on these outlandish assertions while completely ignoring the fact that pornography without women also exists.

Dworkin's work fed into an existing feminist discourse where the place of lesbians was already hotly contested. It was in this context that Leatherwoman and anthropologist Gayle Rubin wrote "The Leather Menace." Rubin argues that women ought to call the feminism of the 1980s feminism, as it demonized anything a woman did which might be masculine as "male identified."¹¹⁰ The celebration of femininity to the detriment of masculinity, even when practiced by women in a way that did not uphold the

¹⁰⁷ Davis and Dean, *Hatred of Sex*, 139.

¹⁰⁸ Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (New York: Perigee, 1981), 9.

¹⁰⁹ Dworkin, *Pornography*, 9.

¹¹⁰ Gayle Rubin, "The Leather Menace," *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 127.

patriarchy, puts leather lesbians and lesbians who practice SM in a hard spot. In a similar way to how Dworkin over exaggerated some genuine complaints of pornography, Rubin finds that lesbians over exaggerate SM in such a way that what they are arguing against is no longer SM but a strawman.¹¹¹ Lesbians against SM cared very little for the nuances of true SM, instead equating it to abuse. This discussion lesbians and feminists were having did not escape the notice of gay men.

In June of 1985 *Drummer* ran an editorial criticizing liberalism's inability to win any rights for gay communities, nor could liberalism keep the already hard-won sites of liberation. The publisher, John H. Embry cited two examples. First the closure of bathhouses in San Francisco as a response to the AIDS pandemic. Second, what the publisher called censorship in Minneapolis as feminists rolled back protections on pornography.¹¹² In a following issue one gay man took the side of the Minneapolis feminists and suggested the publisher ought to understand that all heterosexual porn degrades women.¹¹³ Though Kramer, Rechy, and others do not specifically name feminists to explain their anti-eroticism gay men were aware of the conversations that lesbians and feminists were having.

John Rechy and Larry Kramer are the focus of the discussion of gay men's anti-eroticism. After analyzing first John Rechy's novel *The Sexual Outlaw* and Larry Kramer's *Faggots* this chapter will look at the response to the novels both from the mainstream and the leather press. Then the chapter will look at the work of photographer Robert Mapplethorpe as a way to show the frailty of Rechy and Kramer's view of radical

¹¹¹ Rubin, "The Leather Menace," 129.

¹¹² John H. Embry, "Getting Off," *Drummer*, 75, June 1984.

¹¹³ A. Orange, "Malecall," *Drummer*, 81, 1985.

sex, while shedding light on the eroticism inherent to some of the sex acts that the authors often bring up.

John Rechy and *The Sexual Outlaw*

The year before *Faggots* was published in 1977, Rechy published *The Sexual Outlaw*. This book turned promiscuous sex into something heroic despite Rechy's deep hatred of sex. *The Sexual Outlaw* was not Rechy's first book, he wrote two books before this, the most successful being his 1963 *City of Night*. All of Rechy's work focused on gay hustlers, often to the point of equating the world of gay men to gay hustlers.¹¹⁴ Rechy's work, as will be shown at the end of this section, was polarizing. Despite sometimes praising promiscuous sex, he often moralized to his readers about other types of non-homonormative sex.

The Sexual Outlaw stands out as being semi-autobiographical and *almost* pro-sex. The main character, Jim, is a hustler, a man who has sex with men for money and who also has lots of sex without being paid. The sex that Jim is having, though, is very specific. Jim does not touch other men; they pay him to suck his dick, though Jim rarely ever reaches climax himself. The book, which aimed to be a documentary, is interrupted with essays where Rechy waged his hatred of sex.

It is hard to see Rechy's arguments as a hatred of sex, as Davis and Dean lay out. Before the reader gets too far, Rechy called the promiscuous homosexual a "sexual revolutionary."¹¹⁵ Promiscuity is the antithesis of having sex in Davis and Dean's particular way. However, it does not take long to see that promiscuity is revolutionary,

¹¹⁴ Stanton Hoffman, "The Cities of Night: John Rechy's *City of Night* and the American Literature of Homosexuality" *Chicago Review*, 1964, 200.

¹¹⁵ Rechy, John, *The Sexual Outlaw: A Documentary* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1977), 28.

but only to certain lengths. When Rechy named the promiscuous homosexual a sexual revolutionary, he was referencing sodomy laws, the fact that a man having sex with other men, over and over, and often in public, did so at great risk to himself. At the time of publication, it was illegal for men to have sex with each other, even consensually.¹¹⁶ Despite his praise for the promiscuous gay man, Rechy has more than enough criticism for some gay men.

The gay freedom that Rechy spent most of the book praising is threatening to the social order. The first and most apparent is the police and the state, which made this freedom illegal. The second threat is hiding in plain sight of the gay community and is "comparable only in destructiveness to the impact of repressive laws and persecution by cops."¹¹⁷ This threat, Rechy claimed, is rooted in self-hatred and is the misunderstood practice of SM. Rechy did not advocate for legislation against SM practices but wanted the "grip" of SM on the gay world to dissipate.¹¹⁸ This suggests he did not honestly believe SM was as destructive as the state, seeing that bringing in the state to deal with this issue would wreak havoc across the community. Still, Rechy took an entire chapter of his "documentary," interrupting the plight of Jim, the hustler, to pontificate against SM. It is worth exploring his argument.

One of the first questions Rechy posed is whether or not SM is a legitimate "lifestyle." He offered what he considers legitimate gay lifestyles as a contrast to test this

¹¹⁶ An interesting note, John Rechy, who at the time of writing, is still alive, meaning he saw the federal court decision making sodomy legal. SM, however, is not legally protected, and in the same way that the men of Rechy's book and life could not consent to have sex with men, no one can legally consent to participate in a flogging.

¹¹⁷ Rechy, *The Sexual Outlaw*, 253.

¹¹⁸ Rechy, 253.

question against; hustling, transvestism, and promiscuity.¹¹⁹ Without seriously acknowledging the genuine culture that SM practitioners had created by 1978, Rechy outlined what he believes to be the main arguments made by SM practitioners and leaves them hanging, offering very little in refutation, instead expecting the reader to agree that they are ridiculous. He then outlined how he believes SM is self-hatred, all while glossing over the genuine criticisms of racism and antisemitism in the SM community. Of the examples given to show that SM truly is just acting out self-hatred, Rechy points to the use of words like queer, fag, and cock sucker in the bedroom, adding:

A paradoxical, sad spectacle often occurs outside leather bars: two heavily leathered homosexuals walking to their cars to get together later in an orgy of simulated humiliation encounter a carload of gay-hating punks who yell: "Queers!" "Fags!" — the very same terms one of these homosexuals may soon be using on the other.¹²⁰

Here Rechy could not imagine that a word might contain multiple meanings, that in one instance it is a weapon, in another the weapon reclaimed. Instead, for Rechy, this proves that any man who might call another man a cock sucker is doing so from internalized homophobia. Rechy cannot seem to square these contradictions; because they exist, SM must be a problem.

What makes the complete disregard of SM as a legitimate culture or lifestyle by Rechy the most frustrating is that, just over twenty pages later, he leans into the contradictions of promiscuity. He writes:

“The Joy of promiscuity.
And the pain.
Ecstatic freedom and release.
Loneliness, isolation.

¹¹⁹ Rechy, 258.

¹²⁰ Rechy, 261.

A glorious adventure that, always at the brink, stops even time.
 Panic, frenzy, fear.
 Ambivalences and contradictions. The outlaw faces the Saboteur.”¹²¹

It is okay, Rechy believed, for promiscuity to have contradictions; in fact, it is okay for the sexual outlaw to seek out promiscuity despite the pain that comes with it. These contradictions make the sexual outlaw one to be revered. The pain and loneliness are worth it, Rechy believes.

In the end, Rechy’s hustler is frustrated he cannot find good honest promiscuous sex, because there are too many men looking for SM. Twice in the light of dawn, Jim turns men down. So lonely does this make Jim feel that “for the first time ever, he notices the sound a car door makes as it closes.”¹²² What is so interesting is that men like Larry Kramer and historians like John-Manuel Andriote referenced in the introduction, use Rechy's novel to attack radical sex. They see his work as evidence of the problems of radical sex without acknowledging that in at least one area, Rechy agrees with them. Authors completely ignore Rechy's hatred of sex because the sex he promotes—hustling and promiscuity— is not normative enough. It is not enough to have emotionally distant sex with strangers where there is minimal touching. Men exchange money and besides, Rechy's hero has *too much sex*.

Kramer and *Faggots*

Unlike Jim in *The Sexual Outlaw*, the main character of Larry Kramer’s *Faggots* is looking for love. The book follows the main character Fred Lemish in his attempt, over Memorial Day weekend, to find love. Fred is the only gay man in New York looking for

¹²¹ Rechy, 286.

¹²² Rechy, 307

something other than sex. The population growth of gay men given to the reader 2,556,596 at the start of the book to 2,639,857 in the middle of the book and tops out finally at 2,901,091 by the end of the book, emphasizes this fact. As the book goes on, his previous lover, Dinkey Adams, adopts leather and SM culture and rejects the idea of monogamy, which increasingly distresses Fred. The main event is the opening of a new club called The Toilet Bowl, where the most shocking non-homonormative sex happens. In the end, Fred and Dinkey cannot reconcile their differences, and Fred literally walks into the sunset following a Nazi sex party in the woods of Fire Island. The book's tone disparages radical sex participants. As he walks into the sunset away from the endless sex, Fred thinks, "What I want is better, though! No. Just different. I'm going to have enough trouble changing myself. Can't change everyone else too. Can't change those who don't want to change."¹²³ Despite Fred's admission that he wants something different, he goes on as if everyone else *ought* to change. The message is clear, Fred is changing for the better, and hopefully, others will change too.

Aside from the opening of The Toilet Bowl and the final orgy, there are a few notable events that point to Kramer's anti-eroticism in *Faggots*. Richard Bronstein, a 24-year-old gay man, comes into the scene wanting to join the great sex parties that make up the world of *Faggots* and is ready to torture himself, "Because it's part of the faggot lifestyle—to find abandonment and freedom through ecstasy—fucking and being fucked and light s & m and shitting and pissing and *Oh I want to be abandoned.*"¹²⁴ Here Kramer has his character, a quintessential gay man thinking with his cock — "You didn't

¹²³ Kramer, 382.

¹²⁴ Kramer, 61. Emphasis added

know the cock was a thinking Organ? Well by this time, you should know that it is."¹²⁵ With the lack of blood in his brain, Richard mixes up abandon as a noun and switches it to abandoned as a verb. Rather than wanting a lack of restraint, Richard wants to be deserted. One might agree that finding like-minded men would cause Richard to find freedom and abandon through ecstasy, but Kramer turns it into something more sinister. Faggots want men to abandon them; they want to avoid all emotional attachments. Kramer, through his biographical protagonist, wants to stop being a faggot, and find something better.

In the last scene with Dinky and Fred before the Nazi sex party, Fred makes one final plea to Dinky. "There isn't a scene you haven't seen or done. And you're only thirty. Why can't you imagine something better? I dare you to change! And try for something better!"¹²⁶ Dinky does not change, and at the party, an ex-lover of Dinky's angrily fists him, taunting Fred, "If you want him, this is what you'll get, I wish you'd take him."¹²⁷ This is the final slight for Kramer's Fred. Without his lover, Fred leaves Fire Island, vowing to change himself even if no one else is willing to change.

Responses to Rechy and Kramer

Rechy and Kramer's works were controversial and garnered attention from various groups within the larger gay community. This section examines two specific responses to Rechy and Kramer's books. The first response comes from the mainstream gay press, represented by *The Bay Area Reporter*. *The Bay Area Reporter* was one of the most prominent mainstream gay periodicals and functioned as San Francisco's gay

¹²⁵ Kramer, 223-24.

¹²⁶ Kramer, 340.

¹²⁷ Kramer, 357.

newspaper, though it had national reach. As such, the newspaper invested in news and culture. It reviewed books, plays, movies, art, and interviewed influential people. The second response considered is that of the leather press represented by *Drummer*. By the late 70s, *Drummer* was on its third volume and had a national audience.

Before the release of *The Sexual Outlaw*, the book editor of the *Bay Area Reporter* wrote a scathing tongue-in-cheek review, having received only pieces of the book and a ready-made review from Grove Press, who originally published the book. Noting Rechy's previous work as boring, Paul-Francis Heartman had suspicions regarding the portal of hustlers in *The Sexual Outlaw*. "That street hustlers should levitate to some sort of modern folk hero prompts one to fear for our culture."¹²⁸ Heartman foreshadowed the criticism that Rechy's book would receive even decades later.

Two months later, after the book's release, a different reviewer for the *Bay Area Reporter*, Frank J. Howell, took a crack at *The Sexual Outlaw*. In the review, Howell took issue with Rechy's argument that promiscuity in gay men was revolutionary. "Liberation of any kind," Howell writes, "can be taken to absurd lengths."¹²⁹ This reading of Rechy's book suggests liberation has gone *too far* and sounds not unlike what Fred from *Faggots* might say. It is something that Larry Kramer *would* say in the coming years. Despite disagreements with Rechy, Howell did have positive comments. Howell accurately called Rechy's pontification on SM a "slashing attack," adding that "it rings true."¹³⁰ Howell, like Rechy, believed that SM is an expression of self-hatred. This trend, not rooted

¹²⁸ Paul-Francis Heartman, "The Sexual Outlaw," *The Bay Area Reporter*, 17 February 1977, 29.

¹²⁹ Frank J. Howell. "The Sexual Outlaw," *The Bay Area Reporter*, 28 April 1977.

¹³⁰ Howell, "The Sexual Outlaw."

explicitly in respectability politics, carried over into Larry Kramer's work. It is a trend that completely denied the experiences of the men who Rechy and Kramer discussed.

While the mainstream gay press had mixed things to say about *The Sexual Outlaw*, the leather community was more direct. In June, *Drummer* published an interview of Rechy by Robert Payne to give Rechy space to explain his thoughts regarding SM. Rechy reiterated the message from his book that he is not interested in legislation regarding what two adults do consensually and that "never would I say, never never never, that anything consented to is not allowable."¹³¹ Despite not telling men that what they were doing is "not allowable," Rechy buckled down, arguing that while gay men who were promiscuous in the appropriate way were leading a revolution, those participating in SM were "counter-revolutionary because the rituals of defiance are turned inward."¹³² Rechy was not looking to change the hearts of *Drummer's* readers, a task which would have been futile. However, his attempt to further explain his position only attracted further ire, first from the interview and then from readers.

For most of the interview, at least how *Drummer* printed it, Payne manages to keep a diplomatic tone with Rechy. While Payne and *Drummer* had skin in the game, the magazine had the final say over how the interview appeared. As the representative for *Drummer*, Payne was well-mannered and gave Rechy a fair shot. That is, until the topic of fisting came up. Rechy gave a long-winded answer to the prompt "all sexual behavior comes out of need," when he says, "Fistfucking is a hateful violation of the body and is a flirtation with death—" Payne cut Rechy off to clarify that, "it's an extreme of a

¹³¹ John Rechy, in "John Rechy Author of the "Sexual Outlaw" Talks about S&M with Robert Payne." *Drummer* 3 no. 16, 11.

¹³² Rechy in "John Rechy Author of the "Sexual Outlaw" Talks about S&M with Robert Payne." 10.

particular sex act."¹³³ The two men go back and forth, and neither convinced the other of his point, but, notably, this is the only time that Payne allowed the interview to seem tense, the only time he appeared, at least, to interrupt Rechy. Perhaps the charade of interruption was for the sake of the readers of *Drummer*, who were likely to be, if not actively fisters, then fans of *Drummer*'s fisting content. When Rechy talked about the rise of fisting, he is correct. Other notable members of the scene noticed the upward trend of fisting. Even before Rechy published his work, respected Leatherman and author Larry Townsend noted in his 1972 book, *The Leatherman's Handbook*, that "There has been a great upsurge of interest in fist-fucking over the last couple of years."¹³⁴ Payne did not step out of professionalism for anything less than fisting.

Payne's interview in *Drummer* was not the extent of the leather communities' engagement with Rechy's book or his rhetoric. Two months later, a member of the Leather Fraternity, Jim K, wrote *Drummer* a long letter. Given the space it takes up, it might as well have been an article. In his letter, Jim tackled what he believed were the two most significant issues with Rechy's overall argument regarding SM. First is the idea that it is all just fantasy, and second, Rechy's position was that when he was involved in SM, he was involved in a "ritual of self-hatred."¹³⁵ In his repudiation of these stances, Jim relies on the widely held communal belief that men base SM on mutual trust and respect, even if not a specific type of love.¹³⁶ Jim's letter is well written, clearly with the care of the leather community at the heart of it. Moreover, what Jim and, even to a limited extent,

¹³³ Rechy in "John Rechy Author of the "The Sexual Outlaws," 70.

¹³⁴ Larry Townsend, *The Leatherman's Handbook*, (San Francisco: Le Salon, 1977), 224.

¹³⁵ Jim K. "Affirmative S&M. . .A Positive Approach," *Drummer* 3, no 18, 7.

¹³⁶ Jim K, "Affirmative S&M," 7.

Payne get at with their reactions to Rechy is the difficulty in seeing the intimacy of these men's relationships.

Kramer's *Faggots* was similarly polarizing. Gay men either resonated with his message of the need for monogamy, or felt Kramer was almost mocking them. In *The Bay Area Reporter*, Frank Howell's review of *Faggots* was much kinder than the review he had written the year before for Rechy's *Sexual Outlaws*. Where Howell was willing to condemn what he saw as turning the gay hustler into a "folk hero," and then agreed with Rechy's pontification against SM, he took a much softer stance with Kramer's work. He asked the same question Kramer poses, "Can gay men gradually wean themselves away from an endless diet of steam and booze to care about one another?" However, unlike Kramer, he pretended to take a diplomatic non-answer: "Let each of us wisely pick his own way or partner."¹³⁷ There are a couple of things at play here. First, he carefully side-stepped, and technically did not condemn promiscuity to the same degree that Kramer does. However, more than that is the underlying assumption that there is no way to care for one another if one is promiscuous or partaking in radical sex. Despite not explicitly standing with Kramer, Howell spouted the anti-eroticism that Kramer touted.

Perhaps in an attempt to even the scales a bit, a month later, the *Bay Area Reporter* reprinted a review of *Faggots* from the *Cleveland Gay News*. The author of this review, Richard Grzeiak, was not a fan of the book. However, he does not seem to hate the message so much as how it was delivered. "Take your 10 dollars and send it to Larry Kramer instead. He can use the money and there'll be no middleman to confuse you into

¹³⁷ Frank Howell, "Faggots," *Bay Area Reporter*, 9 no.14, 4 January 1979.

believing you have bought satire, much less literature."¹³⁸ Grzeiak found the book confusing and complained of getting lost in overpopulated characters. The only other criticism that Grzeiak had for *Faggots* is that it represented only the upper-middle-class environment of gay men in New York City and, thus, should not be an example for *all* gay men.¹³⁹ While this is true enough, *Faggots* was hardly representative of the entire population of gay men even in New York City; Grzeiak neither condemns nor agrees with the message at the heart of *Faggots* that gay men ought to turn to monogamy. *The Bay Area Reporter* chose Grzeiak's review from all the reviews published in the other gay magazines to reprint in *The Bay Area Reporter* for a reason. His review was less critical than Howell's, but not overly so. *The Bay Area Reporter* likely felt as if they were publishing "both sides" while reinforcing the ideas central to *Faggots*.

The Impossibility of (locating) intimacy

While Rechy and Kramer were writing about the kinds of sex gay men had, Robert Mapplethorpe photographed the acts Rechy and Kramer hated most. These photographs put SM and leather front and center, to give viewers a look into a private intimate moment. The peculiarity of these photographs sheds light on the anti-eroticism of Rechy and Kramer.

Robert Mapplethorpe was one of the best-known photographers in the United States. He focused on three genres: portraits, flower still lives, and SM images. Mapplethorpe's work is intimate and can be quite erotic; his flower most of all. However, he is most known for his SM and other "obscene" work—that or the portrait of Patti

¹³⁸ Richard Grzeiak, "Another Look at 'Faggots,'" *Bay Area Reporter*, 9 no. 3, 1 February 1979.

¹³⁹ Grzeiak, "Another Look at 'Faggos.'"

Smith, which acts as the cover of her debut album *Horses*. As a member of the Gay New York SM scene, Mapplethorpe appears to give his viewers a similar, though perhaps more authentic, view into the depths of gay perversity as Kramer and Rechy.

One of Mapplethorpe's most famous SM photos, the 1979 *Brian Ridley and Lyle Heeter*, appears to give the viewer an intimate look at the relationship between the two men. The name of the photo itself gives the viewer both first and last names. This intimacy however is contrived.

It is a black-and-white photograph of two men in a well-furnished room. One is sitting in a leather chair. The other, standing, leans against the chair. Both men are in leather, leather pants, leather jackets, leather boots. The man standing wears a leather cap with a full beard. The man sitting has shackles around his ankles connected by a chain which then runs up the chair and connects to a pair of handcuffs. The man standing holds the ends of two chains, one which runs down the chair and connects to the sitting man's ankle. The other is attached to a collar around the sitting man's neck. The man standing rests a riding crop on the chair's arm.

This photograph holds a lot of information for the viewer. The two men's relationship is seemingly on display for all to understand. Lyle, the standing figure, is the "topman" and he presumably used that riding crop on Brian as soon as Mapplethorpe left them alone. It is this last point, *as soon as Mapplethorpe leaves them alone*, that makes up the bulk of Richard Meyer's argument in "Imagining Sadomasochism: Robert Mapplethorpe and the Masquerade of Photography." Meyer argues that Mapplethorpe is not documenting SM culture but rather registering "the fact of [sodomasochistic

subculture] which resides beyond the photographic frame. . .”¹⁴⁰ Meyer continues to argue about the artistic implication of SM in the field of photography, comparing Mapplethorpe's work to the work of other photographers of SM. What Meyer conveys by pointing out the lack of documentary intention of Mapplethorpe's work, is a sense of the difficulty of locating intimacy in SM from the outside. It cannot be documented easily.

John Rechy suffers from the same issue as the viewers of Mapplethorpe's photographs. In Rechy's novel there is a sense of intimacy, a sense that the viewer knows what is happening. However as in Mapplethorpe's photos, what the viewer sees is staged, so that any genuine sense of intimacy or eroticism dissipates. Consider this sexual encounter by Jim in *The Sexual Outlaw*, who is preparing a man for anal sex when suddenly the man says, "Your whole fist! Shove your whole fucking fist up my ass." Jim pauses and steps away from the man— "The implied violence disturbing him at the same time that it arouses him..."¹⁴¹ Alongside SM, fisting is one of Rechy's punching bags in his crusade for proper promiscuity. Rechy makes fisting out to be an inherently violent act and continues this argument later when he decries SM. Jim moves away from the man so quickly that all the reader learns is that someone took Jim's spot and "pushed into the man" without any body parts specified.¹⁴² Jim does not give any more thought to the man and the so-called violence; he moves on looking for "proper" sex. If, however, Jim had tried to understand the man, things might have happened differently. As in Mapplethorpe's photographs, the intimacy was palpable but not documentable.

¹⁴⁰ Richard Meyer, "Imagining Sadomasochism: Robert Mapplethorpe and the Masquerade of Photography," *Qui Parle* 4, no1, (Fall 1990) 62-78.

¹⁴¹ Rechy, 75.

¹⁴² Rechy, 75.

In *Urban Aboriginals: A Celebration of Leathersexuality*, biochemist and leatherman Geoff Mains documents California's leather community through anecdotal and brain chemistry exploration. *Urban Aboriginals*, published in 1984, is about the same generation of men that Kramer and Rechy write about. In one chapter, Mains details the *spiritual euphoria* of leathersex, giving special attention to fisting. Here, Bill is fisting David:

Bill is engrossed in his work. His hand slides and turns slowly, fully preoccupied with the person who surrounds it, whose emotions and pleasures surge with his slightest movement. And as Bill shifts the squareness of his fist, back and forth and about, in time to the gentle yet incessant throb of the music, he evokes from David the song of songs, the soul broken loose, the body free to respond as it always wished it could. And while David reaches towards ecstatic heights, for Bill reality has condensed into this incredible universe of a man on the end of his arm and more than prepared to give. Bill's hand shimmers with a glorious energy. He can close his eyes and focus on the cosmos that exist about his arm. Or he can open them and see before him an image of a man in paradise.¹⁴³

This passage, taken at length, shows none of the *implied* violence that Jim had felt in Rechy's *Sexual Outlaws*. Mains' passage, about two men who are regulars at The Catacombs, a private San Francisco club where many of the patrons were into fisting, shows an incredible amount of intimacy. The paragraph following this describes the intense preparation both the top and the bottom take prior to any successful fisting. "Fisting is no ram-bam sort of thing where some idiot pushes an authoritarian fist into an unprepared and unreceptive hole," one leatherman suggests.¹⁴⁴ Instead it requires an enormous amount of intimacy, care, and trust. It is hard to see Rechy's account of fisting as anything other than an outsider making assumptions. Just like the viewers of

¹⁴³ Geoff Mains, *Urban Aboriginals: A Celebration of Leathersexuality*, (Los Angeles: Daedalus Publishing Company, 2002), 133-34.

¹⁴⁴ Mains, *Urban Aboriginals*, 134.

Mapplethorpe photographs are likely to do, he completely missed the intimacy and erotic nature of such an act.

Kramer had a similar problem, unable to see intimacy for what it is, even though he writes about it in *Faggots*. At the novel's beginning, Kramer introduced the reader to two characters, Irving Slough, a former psychiatrist, and his friend Hans Zoroaster. Irving is in love with Dinkey, and Hans appears to be in love with Irving. In this introduction to the character's friendship, Kramer *almost* touches on the intimacy of SM, seemingly without meaning to.

While describing his rise to prominence, Irving recalls that he has attracted "greater powers that would not so many years ago so much as piss on me," to which Hans responds knowing that Irving will ignore it, "I would piss on you."¹⁴⁵ For Kramer, this is a joke. He wants the reader to laugh at Hans' confession, the way Irving ignores it. Kramer means for the display of perversity to be pathetic. However, if Hans could speak for himself, he might have a different take. Geoff Mains' *Urban Aborigines* can help give Hans a voice of his own. In his chapter on watersports, Mains offered the perspective of those who, like Kramer's Hans, would like to piss on their buddy. One man tells Mains, "A man's pouring out his gut to you, giving you something from his very self. . . I am being given something very precious and private."¹⁴⁶ Another man says, "Maybe I'm speculating too much, but there's something religious about water. You know, baptism, cleansing, the staff of life. I think that to some men watersports is baptism by a buddy."¹⁴⁷ This is a far cry from the running punch line that piss is in *Faggots*. With this perspective

¹⁴⁵ *Faggots*, 76.

¹⁴⁶ Mains, 120-21.

¹⁴⁷ Mains, *Urban Aborigines*, 121.

Hans's words become something intimate; "I would piss on you" becomes "I would do something very precious and private with you." However, only if Kramer is willing to hear Hans for what he is saying, rather than using him as a punching bag in his argument against radical sex.

Kramer and Rechy's anti-eroticism misrepresented radical sex practitioners. Members outside of an established community saw actions taken by that community as something to ridicule without proper care for or understanding of those who partake in the newly demonized actions. To this point, both Rechy and Kramer were teetering on the edge of respectability politics and arguing, through their fiction, that there is a respectable or at least a proper way to have promiscuous sex, or even more conservatively, a respectable way to be a homosexual. These arguments were rooted in a hatred of sex, as outlined by Oliver Davis, and Tim Dean. These same arguments rooted in the hatred of sex though lacking respectability politics would be used at times of life and death that neither Kramer nor Rechy could have anticipated.

**THREE: “HOW CAN THEY VALUE LIFE SO LITTLE AND COCKS AND
ASSES SO MUCH?” ANTI-EROTICISM IN MAINSTREAM GAY ACTIVISM**

“I cannot but be sorry
The given shield was cracked,
My mind reduced to hurry,
My flesh reduced and wrecked.

I have to change the bed,
But catch myself instead”
“The Man with Night Sweats” Thom Gunn

In 1987, when reflecting on his work up to that point in the epidemic, Larry Kramer said, “In reading over my collected diatribes of the past years, I realized I still am unable to resolve this fundamental Problem—how to inspire you without punishing you.”¹⁴⁸ Kramer was not the only gay man who felt like it was his responsibility to make sure that other gay men understood the gravity of the pandemic with the threat of punishment. Randy Shilts, on the other side of the country, also looked back at his time writing about the AIDS crisis and said, “I wanted everyone to have the fear of god in them.”¹⁴⁹ These two men, more than any others in the gay community, represented the position of anti-eroticism. Nearly 15 years apart in age and separated by an entire continent the work of these two men remain testaments of the AIDS pandemic. Larry Kramer’s *The Normal Heart* and Randy Shilt’s *And the Band Played On* are often recommended as works which purport to capture the feelings and history of the AIDS pandemic. The truth is they capture very specific feelings and histories of the AIDS pandemic, one steeped in anti-eroticism and the hatred of sex.

¹⁴⁸ Larry Kramer, “Oh, My People,” in *Reports from the Holocaust: The Making of an AIDS Activist*. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989),186.

¹⁴⁹ Andrew E. Sonter. *The Journalist of Castro Street* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 112.

After the fame that Kramer received from *Faggots* he dropped out of the gay zeitgeist. He was no activist, nor queer liberationist (which he'd made very clear with *Faggots*). This fact would be one repeated by Kramer's adversaries. In his 1987 essay "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," Douglas Crimp, in response to Kramer's play *The Normal Heart*, wrote "This is the view of someone who did not participate in the gay movement, and who has no sense of its history, its complexities, its theory and practice (was he too busy taking advantage of its gains?)"¹⁵⁰ Kramer appeared at the beginning of the AIDS epidemic ready to fight but did so without knowledge of the fight that came before him.

Published two years apart Kramer's *The Normal Heart* and Shilts' *And the Band Played On* suffered many of the same faults. Crimp described them in his essay as the manifestation of the need of their authors to project morality onto gay men. This morality is supposed to be some kind of "common sense" that anyone who disagrees with must be missing the obvious picture.¹⁵¹ In a move that foreshadowed Davis and Dean's *Hatred of Sex* Crimp points out that for Kramer this morality was monogamy, *not* safer sex. Crimp follows this up with the astute observation that monogamy offers little if any protection of HIV.¹⁵² This chapter explores Kramer and Shilt's "common sense," looking at the ways in which anti-eroticism presents itself in these two men's most influential work during the AIDS pandemic and the responses to the work.

This chapter will first look at Kramer's anti-eroticism rhetoric in his essay "1,112 and Counting," and his play *The Normal Heart*, tracing the threads he laid in *Faggots*.

¹⁵⁰ Douglas Crimp, "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," *October* (Winter, 1987), 247.

¹⁵¹ Crimp, "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," 239.

¹⁵² Crimp, "How to have promiscuity in an Epidemic," 247.

Following Kramer's work will be an analysis of Randy Shilts' book *And The Band Played on* looking at the way the San Franciscan author used anti-eroticism rhetoric to understand and tell the story of the AIDS pandemic. Following the analysis of these works will be a discussion of the response by the community to these works, showing the ways gay men viewed and understood the arguments Kramer and Shilts were making.

Larry Kramer "1,112 and Counting" and *The Normal Heart*

In 1983 Larry Kramer wrote his first angry letter to the gay community. In 1985, believing that Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC), the organization which he helped build, was not doing enough, he penned a play that he hoped would do more. These two pieces, an essay "1,112 and Counting" and a play *The Normal Heart* act as the next step of Kramer's anti-eroticism, something that never went away, even while later in the pandemic he directed his anger elsewhere. The audience for both of these works was New York's gay men. "1,112 and Counting" was first published in *The New York Native*, a gay periodical, and *The Normal Heart* had a nearly all-gay cast.

These two works came at very different times in the pandemic, even if they are only three years apart. In 1983, the pandemic, was only slowly being recognized by the gay community. By 1985, it was impossible to ignore, though much of Kramer's rhetoric suggests that gay men *did* ignore their friends dying. GMHC founded in 1982 was, to Kramer's eyes, becoming *more* conservative as time went on. *The Normal Heart* is, in part, Kramer rationalizing his leaving the group. "1,112 and Counting," however, was a

call for funds for GMHC. Despite their different formats, and different contexts, both were grounded in anti-eroticism.

“If this article doesn’t scare the shit out of you, we’re in real trouble,” was the opening of the front-page article of *The New York Native* in March of 1983, juxtaposed by a young man with his shirt pulled up flexing for gay readers throughout the city.¹⁵³ The title of the article referenced the 1,112 reported cases of AIDS in the United States. A number which had Larry Kramer, rightfully, terrified. The problem was, despite having set up GMHC the organization Kramer did not believe it had responded with urgency. Apparently, no one else was as worried about the situation as Kramer.

His article continued listing first what little they knew about AIDS, then he focused on the number of gay men dying, the irreversibility of AIDS, and the lack of medical breakthrough to that point. “Why isn’t every gay man in this city so scared shitless that he is screaming for action?” Kramer asks. He followed immediately with “Does every gay man in New York *want to die?*”¹⁵⁴ This was not the first time Kramer wrote about AIDS. In 1981, he called the disease “the death of any visible love,” while begging men to give money to the cause.¹⁵⁵ Following this question, Kramer listed various AIDS related issues: hospitals not taking patients taxpayer dollars going anywhere but the crisis, and how the mayor of New York at the time, Ed. Koch ignored gay men. Finally, he listed those things which he was tired of, things which needed to change. Government officials were first, second were closeted gay doctors who avoid the

¹⁵³ Larry, Kramer “1,112 and Counting,” *Reports from the Holocaust: The Making of an AIDS Activist*. (New York: St. Martin’s press, 1989), 33.

¹⁵⁴ Kramer, “1,112 and Counting,” 35. Italics in original.

¹⁵⁵ Kramer, Larry, “The First Defense,” *Reports from the Holocaust: The Making of an AIDS Activist*. (New York: St. Martin’s press, 1989), 22.

issue to keep from being associated with gay men. The gay press got two paragraphs, one aimed directly at *The Advocate*, a California based magazine and the most popular gay magazine of the time. Finally, he criticized gay men who give money to charities which were not helping end the crisis.¹⁵⁶ This at least gives some clue into who Kramer was speaking to. More than anyone else Kramer spoke to middle-class gay men, those who, without a family to support, have disposable income.

The last group which deserved Kramer's ire was those very men who Kramer wished would see his way. In 1978 Kramer asked the readers of *Faggots*, "you didn't know that the cock was a thinking organ?"¹⁵⁷ Now, Kramer no longer made jokes to hide his irritation. "I am sick of guys who can only think with their cocks," he wrote.¹⁵⁸ Despite this allusion to his previous work, Kramer did not invoke *Faggots* as an "I told you so." He did, however, ask his readers how it was possible that those men who refused to give up "careless sex" "Can value life so little and cocks and asses so much?"¹⁵⁹ Kramer does not tell gay men what they might do, aside from giving up their "careless sex," but he implied that they move to monogamous sex.

More than expressing his exasperation with sexually active gay men, he was angry that anyone would blame good gay men like him for AIDS. "Increasingly, [gay men] are being *blamed* for AIDS. . . through our "promiscuity," through just being the gay men so much of the rest of the world has learned to hate."¹⁶⁰ Kramer went on to explain, rightfully, how gay men were in fact *victims* of AIDS. However, Kramer did not

¹⁵⁶ Kramer, "1,112 and Counting," 43-45.

¹⁵⁷ Larry Kramer, *Faggots*, (New York: Plume, 1978),223.

¹⁵⁸ Kramer, "1,112 and Counting," 46.

¹⁵⁹ Kramer, "1,112 and Counting," 46.

¹⁶⁰ Kramer, "1,112 and Counting," 48. Italics in original.

allow all gay men to be blameless. “Not all Jews are blamed for. . . money lending. . . but all gays are blamed for John Gacy, the North American Man/Boy Love Association, and AIDS.”¹⁶¹ This wording made it impossible to believe that Kramer did not see *some* men as worthy of blame for AIDS. Gay men were to blame for the North American Man/Boy Love Association, even if it is not *all* gay men. So it follows that some gay men must be blamed for AIDS, at least a little bit. One does not have to stretch the point to assume it is those gay men who were “thinking with their cocks.”

This article was published while Kramer was working with GMHC, but he prefaced that they were not the views of GMHC.¹⁶² One of the biggest battles Kramer had with GMHC was their lack of recommendations on how to have safe sex. Where GMHC would not issue recommendations at all, Kramer was pushing for men to stop having sex completely. This battle takes up much of *The Normal Heart*.

In the most technical sense, *The Normal Heart* is a work of fiction. However, the line between fiction and reality is even slimmer than in *Faggots*. This play opened in 1985 and ran until 1999 off Broadway. The main character of *The Normal Heart*, a gay man named Ned, is a stand-in for Larry Kramer. Other characters were thinly veiled rewrites of real-life people. Bruce takes after Paul Popham, the real-life president of GMHC from its inception until 1985. Emma, one of the only women in the play, takes the place of Dr. Linda Laubenstein, one of the first physicians in New York to treat gay men

¹⁶¹ Kramer, “1,112 and Counting,” 48-49. The North American Man/Boy Love Association, an organization which exists to this day, argues for the removal of age of consent laws in order to allow for consensual sexual relations between adults and minors. Cross-generational sex lies well beyond the scope of this project, and requires nuisances that the author does not care to get into. When speaking of radical sex in other parts of this thesis the author does not mean to include any sex where any party is unable to consent.

¹⁶² Kramer, “1,112 and Counting,” 50.

with AIDS. The real-life parallels were never supposed to be a secret, as the program of the 2011 Broadway revival of *The Normal Heart* notes. As Kramer wrote to the audience, “Please know that everything in *The Normal Heart* happened. These were real people who lived and spoke and died and are presented here as best I could.”¹⁶³ Regardless, this is not a historical account nor does this project treat it like one. How *true* the story is matters less than the arguments Kramer made throughout the play.

The audience did not have time to settle in before Kramer began his anti-eroticism lecture. In the first scene when Emma examines Ned, she tries to convince him that he must speak to gay men about stopping the spread of HIV, by ending their promiscuous ways. Ned asks Emma “Do you realize that you are talking about millions of men who have singled out promiscuity to be their principal political agenda, the one they’d die before abandoning? How do you deal with that?”¹⁶⁴ This is the thread which has been pulled from *Faggots* through “1,112 and Counting.” Gay men, Kramer is sure, care for nothing but sex. Kramer emphasized this when Ned tells Emma that sex “becomes an addiction” for gay men, who do it mostly because they feel pressure from their peers.¹⁶⁵ Kramer places the rest of the work on his belief that gay culture had tragically defined itself around careless and ultimately fatal, meaningless sex. By dismissing sex as frivolous in all aspects, it was easier to fault gay men for not stopping as the death toll rose.

¹⁶³ Larry Kramer, *The Normal Heart and The Destiny of Me*, (New York: Grove Press, 2000), 122.

¹⁶⁴ Kramer, *The Normal Heart*, 31.

¹⁶⁵ Kramer, *The Normal Heart*, 31.

Not only was Kramer suggesting, in the first scene, that gay men who do not simply stop having sex are at fault, he equated the lack of sex with safer sex. While it is true that if men stopped having sex they would lower their risk of contracting HIV, it is not true that there was no other way of reducing the risk at the time. When Ned asks if Emma is sure that they spread HIV with sex, she tells Ned that scientists knew how people spread hepatitis viruses before they had isolated them, HIV is the same.¹⁶⁶ What Emma fails to mention is the ways in which a man might keep from getting hepatitis. Scientists were rolling out new vaccines at the time. Kramer was writing this scene about a time when there was very little medical knowledge of HIV. His comparison with hepatitis, which gay men were very familiar with, showed how a New York doctor might be able to make logical medical conclusions. Kramer does not follow those conclusions to the end however, deciding instead to preach total abstinence.

At the end of the first act Ned speaks with his lawyer brother Ben about taking up GMHC pro bono. Ben picks up and waves around a copy of *Newsweek* which stage directions say should be titled *Gay America* and says, “I open magazines and I see pictures of you guys in leather and chains and whips and black masks, with captions saying this is a social worker, this is a computer analyst, this is a schoolteacher. . . ,”¹⁶⁷ This issue of *Newsweek*, however, was published in 1983, two years after this scene took place. The article Ben criticizes is almost certainly the 1964 *Life* article previously discussed which featured a two-page picture of, The Toolbox, a San Francisco leather bar. The photograph captured a mural on the inside of the bar by leather artist Chuk Arnet,

¹⁶⁶ Kramer, *The Normal Heart*, 31.

¹⁶⁷ Kramer, *The Normal Heart*, 63.

with leathermen milling about in front of the mural and open bar door.¹⁶⁸ This article, and the picture accompanying it, made quite a stir as it was the leather scene's first "coming out" to the rest of America. Kramer uses the sensationalist tactics of *Life* magazine to continue the connection of gay men on the whole to leathermen, which his fictional counterpart Ned takes issue with when speaking with his brother.

While Ned protests that not all gay men are so bad as bringing leathermen masquerading as social workers and schoolteachers, Ben keeps going.

But then you tell me how you go to the bathhouses and fuck blindly, and to me that's not so different from this. You guys don't seem to understand why there are rules, regulations, guidelines, responsibilities. You guys have a dreadful image problem.¹⁶⁹

Ben is not worried about the risk of infection for gay men having sex in bathhouses.

Instead, he is worried about the lack of normative sex. He is participating in the hatred of sex as laid out by Oliver Davis and Tim Dean. It would be bad enough if this were all, but Ned does not defend his community, does not suggest that perhaps Ben is not seeing the whole picture. "I know that! That's what has to be changed," Ned says. "That's why it's so important to have people like you supporting us. You're a respected person. You already have your dignity."¹⁷⁰ For Ned, the change that needs to happen is that gay men must start following the "rules, and regulations, guidelines, and responsibilities" that Ben believes in. In short, gay men must conform to heteronormativity if they are going to

¹⁶⁸ Gayle Rubin, "The Miracle Mile: South of Market and Gay Male Leather," in *Reclaiming San Francisco: History, Politics, Culture*, (San Francisco: City Lights, 1998), https://www.foundsf.org/index.php?title=Folsom_Street:_The_Miracle_Mile. The most famous photo of this mural is the wall of the bar standing after a 1981 fire, the mural overlooking the rubble.

¹⁶⁹ Kramer, *The Normal Heart*, 63.

¹⁷⁰ Kramer, *The Normal Heart*, 63.

have the support of men like Ben, and if they are going to survive the pandemic. For the rest of the play Ben and Ned hardly see eye to eye, but on one thing they agree, sex has its place and its time, and gay men are doing it all wrong.

This entire conversation between Ben and Ned has very little to do with HIV. Kramer used this scene to remind the audience of the position he took in *Faggots*, that gay men must begin having sex as close to heterosexual sex as possible. Gay men must become monogamous, partnered beings in the image of heterosexuals. This monogamous partnered sex is the “particular way” in which Larry Kramer expresses his hatred of sex.¹⁷¹ However Kramer also expressed his anti-eroticism through the theoretical framework of Davis and Dean’s *Hatred of Sex*; he makes his argument quite plain towards the end of the play.

Ned and the board of GMHC continue to argue about the ways in which they should be using what little political capital they have. After Ned publishes an article in *The New York Native*, the men of the play are unable to contain their anger at each other. Bruce and Mickey are discussing the article and Ned asks why Bruce is so upset about what he said in the essay. When Bruce suggests it is the way that Ned said it rather than what Ned said, Ned blows up. “I said the gay leaders who created this sexual-liberation philosophy in the first place have been the death of us. Mikey, why didn't you guys fight for the right to get married instead of the right to legitimize promiscuity?”¹⁷² This is one of the passages Crimp cites as showing Kramer’s lack of engagement in the politics of the gay community leading up to the AIDS pandemic. This is also where it is most clear that

¹⁷¹ Davis, Dean. *Hatred of Sex*, 29.

¹⁷² Kramer, *The Normal Heart*, 81.

Kramer equates monogamy to safer sex.¹⁷³ Kramer sweeps away decades of history and politics with this single paragraph. He crossed a line that he found hard to come back from, though later in his career he does change focus.

Both “1,112 and Counting” and *The Normal Heart* beg gay men to come out of the closet. Kramer argued that by staying in the closet men are unable to successfully advocate for themselves. However, he wants gay men to express their sexuality only so far as to have a single lover. That they assimilate to heteronormativity as best as possible is the core of Kramer’s anti-eroticism. It also lies at the center of Randy Shilts’ anti-eroticism.

Randy Shilts and *And The Band Played On*

Randy Shilts’s *And The Band Played On* is, if nothing else, an incredibly detailed historical work. The book spans 621 pages and more than a decade. It reads as if he compiled the news from around the world about AIDS as it came out, each section attached to a date and a location. The sheer amount of detail is impressive and gave *And The Band Played On* status that no other work about the crisis had at the time, or since. Despite being written by a gay man, *And The Band Played On* was not, unlike anything else analyzed in this thesis, written *for* gay men. While Kramer was writing for gay men with the side effect of heterosexuals seeing his plays and reading his essays, Shilts was writing for heterosexuals with the same effect on gay men. This meant the politics of the text are slightly different. Shilts made a career of writing about the gay community for

¹⁷³ Crimp, “How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic,” 247.

heterosexuals. He became proficient in making the gay world palatable for straight people. This was his best work.

As a journalist, Shilts expected readers would simply believe him. They understood he had journalistic integrity and would not lie to them. He writes:

This book is a work of journalism. There has been no fictionalization. For purposes of narrative flow, I reconstruct scenes, recount conversations and occasionally attribute observations to people with such phrases as “he thought” or “she felt” such references are drawn from either the research interviews I conducted for the book or from research conducted during my years of covering the AIDS epidemic for the *San Francisco Chronicle*.¹⁷⁴

This is the first paragraph of Shilts’ “Note on Sources.” Shilts provided a list of interviews, noting that to that point in the pandemic he had conducted over 900 interviews about the issue and that listing them would be a nuisance to all involved. Perhaps this is true, likely a list of 900 interviews would tell a reader nothing. However, Shilts was playing with fire.

In his essay “How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic,” Douglas Crimp laid out issues with Shilts’ work he wrote that: “. . .to Shilts, politics is something alien, something others have, and political speech is AIDSpeak. Shilts has no politics, only common sense; he speaks only the “truth” even if the truth is “brutal” like being “victimized” by AIDS.”¹⁷⁵ Shilts set himself up to being the perfect neutral journalist, and without anyone being able to truly check his sources, how could anyone disagree? The problem is that Shilts conceived *And The Band Played On* as a journalistic effort, but it reads like a historic one, without adequate documentation.

¹⁷⁴ Shilts, Randy. *And the Band Played On*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 623.

¹⁷⁵ Crimp, 240.

While Shilts made narrative choices that support his anti-eroticism, few of his choices are genuinely deplorable. Questionable, or contentious, yes, but deplorable no. There is one exception, however. *And the Band Played On* solidified the myth of a “patient zero,” the idea that one man brought HIV/AIDS to North America. And if that were not horrible enough, this patient zero, Gaetan Dugas, a real man who died of AIDS prior to the publication of the book, was written as if he were a villain. Shilts pulled no punches when discussing Dugas. Chapter Two opens with Dugas vainly looking in the mirror to make sure his face is unblemished, while Shilts hints at “troubling news” Dugas received a few weeks prior, referencing Dugas’ HIV diagnosis.¹⁷⁶ This treatment of Dugas helped the book sell. The initial press release for the book, written by the publishers, highlighted this story line dubbing Dugas “the man who brought AIDS to North America.”¹⁷⁷ Gaetan Dugas did not bring AIDS to North America, nor was he labeled patient zero by scientists. The myth of patient zero comes from a misreading of a chart which labeled Gaetan Dugas Patient O, O for Outside of California.¹⁷⁸ Had he been responsible for bringing HIV/AIDS to North America, he still would not have deserved the scorn that Shilts and later the media laid on him. Even if Shilts genuinely believed that Dugas was the first man in North America with HIV/AIDS, that would not justify the treatment he received. While the more nuanced ways in which Shilts expresses

¹⁷⁶ Shilts, *And the Band Played On*, 11.

¹⁷⁷ Crimp, 241.

¹⁷⁸ Anjali Tsui, “Scientists Debunk Myth that ‘Patient Zero’ Brought AIDS to America. *Frontline*, PBS, 28 October 2016.
<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/scientists-debunk-myth-that-patient-zero-brought-aids-to-america/>

anti-eroticism using Dugas follow, it is important to lay that rhetoric against the false medical portrait.

Shilts tied Dugas to the leather community. While it is unclear if Dugas was a member of a motorcycle club, or a regular at a home leather bar, Shilts bet on his audience being uninformed about the ins and outs of the leather community. This worked to his favor when describing the AIDS forum in Vancouver in 1983. Of all the men mentioned at this event, only Gaetan's clothing is described as "his black leather outfit."¹⁷⁹ Although Shilts does not elaborate further on Dugas clothing, it is this striking outfit that allowed the organizer of the forum Bob Tivey to recognize Dugas as a man who he'd met a decade before. The kind of man "that everyone was looking for in those long nights at the gay bars."¹⁸⁰ While Shilts could have ignored this detail, it allowed him to emphasize just how deep Dugas's "sins" went. Not only was he good-looking and promiscuous, but he might also just be acquainted with leathermen and engage in radical sex.

That Gaetan Dugas was good looking was not something readers of *And The Band Played On* were likely to miss. Shilts was obsessed with Dugas's looks and his apparent vanity. Shilts introduced Dugas to the reader as "the man everyone wanted, the ideal for this community at this place and time."¹⁸¹ The first words that Gaetan Dugas speaks in Shilts' novel are, "I am the prettiest one."¹⁸² Over and over Shilts emphasized this vanity, his commitment to Dugas's vanity is almost cartoonish. So much so it

¹⁷⁹ Shilts, 247.

¹⁸⁰ Shilts, 247.

¹⁸¹ Shilts, 21.

¹⁸² Shilts, 21.

resembles Kramer's "satire" published ten years before. "Gaetan Dugas would walk into a gay bar, scan the crowd, and announce to his friends, 'I am the prettiest one.' Usually his friends had to agree, he was right."¹⁸³ Is not that far removed from Kramer's most vain character in *Faggots*, "Randy [Dildough] did not think his last name an unsatisfactory one. . . because Randy tried not to think that anything about his fine self was less than perfection."¹⁸⁴ The vanity that Shilts bestowed on Dugas allowed him to justify his journalistic mistreatment of Dugas. It was his vanity that led Dugas to reckless sex, arguments with doctors about his condition, and post-diagnosis sex.¹⁸⁵ Even when Dugas was not having sex, Shilts demonized him.

Shilts reported on Dugas's cruising habits, though because he was writing for a straight audience, he called it "sexual prowling." Regardless, Shilts said that it had "reached near-legendary proportions." It is not the number of men that Dugas is sleeping with that Shilts mentions next, he does not talk about the amount of unprotected sex that Dugas is having. Instead, it is the lesions on Dugas's forearms that Shilts takes issue with. "He made little effort to conceal his medical problems, casually rolling up his sleeves as he quaffed beers at pubs, despite the lesions on his forearms."¹⁸⁶ Ignoring the fact that displaying his lesions in a gay bar in 1983 would almost certainly prompt questions from men he was sleeping with, and thus give them a chance to weigh risks for themselves, what is it that Shilts wants Dugas to do? At that moment Dugas is not having sex with

¹⁸³ Shilts, 21.

¹⁸⁴ Larry Kramer, *Faggots*, (New York: Plume, 1987), 91.

¹⁸⁵ Shilts, 247.

¹⁸⁶ Shilts, 251.

anyone, rather he was spending time in the community. Yet, for Shilts, sitting at a bar with visible Kaposi Sarcoma lesions was enough to warrant scorn.

Randy Shilts used Gaetan Dugas to show the sins of gay men. He moralized with the tale of Dugas, suggesting that men with AIDS brought it on themselves and that they should shut themselves away from the rest of the population. Gaetan Dugas had too much sex and now the entire gay community was paying for it.

Gaetan Dugas was not the only way in which Shilts utilized anti-erotic rhetoric. Next to Dugas, one of the longest story threads related to bathhouses. As spaces where gay men met up to have anonymous sex, bathhouses were the source of much debate during the AIDS epidemic. Shilts, with his “common sense,” placed himself very firmly on the side of closing the bath houses. Like everything else, this was a discussion that deserved nuance and thoughtful consideration. Shilts gave it neither of those things. In telling the story of the bath house debate, Shilts focused on San Francisco, his analysis is littered with San Francisco politics that tangled up his argument. In summary there were two political clubs, the Harvey Milk Club and the Alice B. Toklas club. The Milk club stood on the side of closing the bath houses, while the Toklas club believed that proposal “had violated the unwritten agreement that bathhouses were something that should not even be discussed publicly.”¹⁸⁷ In his column in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Shilts sided with the Milk club on closing bathhouses.¹⁸⁸ He was unable to let that position go in his book, making anyone who disagrees, or wants to introduce nuance to the conversation, seem as if they lack common sense.

¹⁸⁷ Shilts, 317.

¹⁸⁸ Stoner, *The Journalist of Castro Street*, 33-34.

Shilts spent four paragraphs looping readers into the bathhouse drama, laying out each side's argument before he concludes with the admonishment of a Milk club leader about not using condoms, "Kraus thought it was strange that anybody would reduce the aspirations of the gay movement to a disinclination for rubbers."¹⁸⁹ Here Shilts did what Kramer never did; he acknowledged there were ways men could make sex safer, that they could reduce the chance of HIV infection by using condoms. Shilts linked the admonishment of the Milk club leader to the debate about bathhouses despite it being a response to the leader of the Toklas club discussing the use of condoms. Shilts was mixing safer sex with the closure of bath houses as if they were one and the same. In doing so, despite his acknowledgment of the existence of condoms, his support of closing the bathhouses allowed for the assumption that men cannot make sex in bathhouses safer when it comes to HIV infection. This is, of course, untrue, but Shilt's hatred of sex did not allow for nuance.

Former journalist James Kinsella argues in his book, *Covering the Plague: AIDS and the American Media*, that by focusing on the issue of bath houses Shilts took time and focus away from the very thing that might save lives, changing sexual habits.¹⁹⁰ In his 1987 book *Policing Desire: Pornography AIDS and The Media*, author Simon Watney argues that "[gay men] need to develop a culture which will support the transition to safer sex by establishing the model of an erotics of protection succour and support

¹⁸⁹ Shilts, 317.

¹⁹⁰ James Kinsella, *Covering the Plague: AIDS and the American Media*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 179.

within the framework of our pre-AIDS sex lives.”¹⁹¹ Watney and Kinsella see, what Kramer and Shilts do not, the problems with anti-eroticism.

Response to *The Normal Heart* and *And the Band Played on*

In May of 1984 *The Bay Area Reporter* reviewed Kramer’s *The Normal Heart*. Unlike the largely warm reception that *Faggots* received, *The Normal Heart* was criticized for being controversial and for painting Larry Kramer as the only man in the world who seemed to care about the AIDS Pandemic.¹⁹² While this is certainly one of the ways the play came off, that was not the biggest issue some men had with it. “I fought for gay liberation and sexual freedom, and now you’re telling me I’m a murderer?”, one gay man asked.¹⁹³ This was the real-time ramification of Kramer’s and Shilts’ anti-eroticism. For Kramer specifically, the refusal to acknowledge safer sex practices, and insisting on monogamy if not complete abstinence, lead to his characters saying things like, “the gay leaders who created this sexual-liberation philosophy in the first place have been the death of us.”¹⁹⁴ Shilts’ *And The Band Played On* did not receive the same kind of condemnation, because Larry Kramer did not mince his words, nor did he pretend his politics were middle of the road. By making himself out as the only man who cared, he set the play up for a fiery response. In the process he managed to alienate an entire political movement he had never given a fair shake.

While both Kramer and Shilts called for “common sense” morality to shape their arguments, where Kramer was volatile with his argument, Shilts framed *And The Band*

¹⁹¹ Simon Watney, *Policing Desire: Pornography AIDS and The Media*, Third Edition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 131.

¹⁹² “Two for One,” *The Bay Area Reporter*, 23 May 1985.

¹⁹³ “Two For One,” *The Bay Area Reporter*, 23 May 1985.

¹⁹⁴ Kramer, *The Normal Heart*, 81.

Played On as stating the facts. He did this so well that in the review of the book, *The Bay Area Reporter* promised readers that “bathhouse closure is not the main focus of this book, by any means.”¹⁹⁵ This was a necessary assurance for *Bay Area Reporter* readers as Shilts had used his column in *the San Francisco Chronicle* as a means of lobbying for their closure. While the author of the review, Paul Reed, was correct that bathhouses were not the *main* focus of the book, the critical reading of *And The Band Played On* above shows that Shilts, still lobbied for the closure of bathhouses. Reed focused on how Shilts used his book to criticize slow government action, only mentioning the tragic treatment of Gaetan Dugas as “the most chilling story of . . . allegedly the man who brought AIDS to America.”¹⁹⁶

The response to the AIDS pandemic was as varied as gay men themselves. To his dying day, Jewish American Larry Kramer likened it to the Holocaust. Whether or not one agrees with this particular comparison, the horror that the gay community faced is hard to conceptualize today. In his “1,112 and Counting,” Kramer named 20 men he knew who died of AIDS. In 1983 this was only two years into the pandemic. Gay men were dying and the thing that was killing them was not well understood. Information, when available at all, was confusing and sometimes contradictory. Had every gay man simply stopped having sex in 1981, AIDS would have spread much slower. However, this was, as Kramer has Ned Weeks point out in *The Normal Heart*, an unrealistic expectation.¹⁹⁷ Still Kramer’s and Shilts’ responses came from this terrifying atmosphere. Yet it did not come without consequence. Kramer alienated gay leaders, the very men

¹⁹⁵ Paul Reed, “Shilts’ Book Shows Politicization of AIDS,” *Bay Area Reporter*, 8 October 1987.

¹⁹⁶ Reed, “Shilts’ Book Shows Politicization of AIDS,” *Bay Area Reporter*, 8 October 1987.

¹⁹⁷ Kramer, *The Normal Heart*, 31.

who he needed on his side. And Shilts, some suggest, might have prolonged the pandemic by focusing on the closure of bath houses instead of changed sexual behavior. Gay men were not going to stop having sex, nor did they need to. Had the loudest voices called for safer sex rather than demonizing those who were having sex perhaps things would have been different, it is impossible to say. But what Watney and Kinsella are missing is that some men *were* doing just that. The next chapter describes the ways in which radical sex communities used eroticism to promote not only safer sex, but also AIDS awareness and fundraising.

FOUR "NOT ONLY FOR YOUR OWN SAKE AND SAFETY, BUT FOR ALL YOUR BROTHERS" EROTIC SAFER SEX AND OTHER AIDS ACTIVISM BY RADICAL SEX PRACTITIONERS

Stopped upright where I am
 Hugging my body to me
 As if to shield it from
 The Pains that will go through me,

As if hands were enough
 To hold an avalanche off.
 "The Man With Night Sweats" Thom Gunn

By 1986 only a few members of the gay community were willing to ignore the toll that AIDS was taking on the men around them. In San Francisco, the *Bay Area Reporter* told readers that more than 1,300 people had died of AIDS and that more than ninety-five percent of all cases were gay men.¹⁹⁸ Ronald Reagan stayed quiet for another year, but that silence had not stopped men like Larry Kramer and Randy Shilts from speaking out and condemning members of their community. While these two men were among the loudest voices, they were not the only voices pleading to the gay community. At the beginning of the year, Mid America Fists In Action (MAFIA), a Chicago-based fisting club, asked members to commit to a 100 percent safe year regarding their sexual practices. "Please, for not only your sake and safety," the newsletter read, "but for all your club brothers."¹⁹⁹ This response, a sense of personal responsibility for community health, was markedly different from Kramer's anti-erotic speech a year later, in the same vein as the rest of his AIDS rhetoric "Yes, most of all, I'm tired of you," he said, "I'm

¹⁹⁸ "August AIDS Statistics," *Bay Area Reporter*, 11 September 1986.

¹⁹⁹ "Happy New Year," *MAFIA News*, January 1986, MAFIA Papers, Leather Archive and Museum, Chicago IL.

tired of the death wish of the gay community."²⁰⁰ Rather than blame men for the horrors of the AIDS Pandemic, MAFIA and other groups of the radical sex community took it upon themselves to care for each other and do what they could to stop the spread without changing who they were. Newsletters were some of the most valuable sources for radical sex practitioners to keep up with their communities. These newsletters provide the foundation of this chapter. These men, instead of shaming each other for having sex, raised money for research and care, eroticized safer sex practices, and framed safer sex practices as not only an individual responsibility but one of the whole community.²⁰¹

With Shilts focusing on debates about closing bathhouses, debates that might have led to a prolonged suffering of the gay community, and Kramer acting as if he was the only man in the world who cared, these very loud voices dominate the historical record. Historians see the gay community as being full of men who cared about the pandemic and stopped having sex, or men who did not care for their community and continued having sex. This false dichotomy ignores the reality of many men who cared very deeply, so much so that they changed the way they were having sex. The analysis of radical sex communities and their response to AIDS, their commitment to safer sex and the erotic, allows for a reframing of the historical narrative of the response to AIDS.

²⁰⁰ Larry Kramer, "I Can't Believe You Want to Die," *Reports from the Holocaust: The Making of an AIDS Activist*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 163.

²⁰¹ Activists and academics have, since the 80s, had a back-and-forth between the use of safer sex and safe sex. While the author will defer to what men used in direct quotes, he will otherwise use safer sex to acknowledge that all sex poses safety risks, even if that risk is not an HIV infection. This puts normative monogamous heterosexual sexual activity on the same playing field as nonnormative activities like fisting, or barebacking, allowing for discussion of risk awareness rather than a system of classification that privileges normative activities over nonnormative activities.

This chapter will begin by focusing on how radical sex communities fundraised for AIDS causes, while keeping eroticism at the center of their community. Following that discussion will be an analysis of safer sex rhetoric in relation to HIV/AIDS, and how radical sex communities were uniquely interested in eroticizing safer sex. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, is a discussion of the ways in which radical sex communities saw safer sex practices as a communal responsibility. Because making sex safe was at the heart of these communities, the importance of safer sex regarding HIV/AIDS was met with creativity and eroticism.

Fundraising

In the wake of the AIDS epidemic, fundraisers were everywhere; Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) was initially responsible for some of the largest. One of ACT UP's final acts during the epidemic was an art auction fundraiser.²⁰² From coast to coast, groups developed to collect money for various AIDS efforts, research, and patient care. One of the first groups, the AIDS Emergency Fund, was founded in 1982 by leathermen and grew to support many different groups in San Francisco.²⁰³ While leathermen and other radical sex practitioners did mainstream work like AIDS Emergency Fund (AEF), they also found ways to raise money for their brothers in ways that did not shun eroticism.

²⁰² In 1989 ACT UP raised 650,000 dollars at an art auction. Artist and activist Patrick Moore remembers the auction's large sum of money as "the worst possible thing that could have happened to ACT UP." As suddenly the organization was spending money in places they had previously criticized like the New York Times. Sarah Schulman *Let The Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP New York 1987-1993*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux), 519.

²⁰³ Alan Selby, *The Mayor of Folsom Street*, ed. Jordy Jones (Springfield, PA: Fair Page Media LLC, 2017), 90.

Houston leathermen raised nearly 2,000 dollars in 1982 for a local Kaposi's Sarcoma committee in an auction and raffle event. What distinguished this auction from auctions held by groups like GMHC and ACT UP was that, while raffle prizes were things like TVs and microwaves, the auction items were not items at all. Instead, this was a "slave" auction, where leathermen bought raffle tickets to bid on the chance to win "ownership" of fellow leathermen.²⁰⁴ These events were common enough in the leather community before the AIDS epidemic.²⁰⁵ John Rechy wrote disparagingly about them in *The Sexual Outlaw*, and this Houston event was the fourth annual raising money for the leather club The American Leathermen. In 1982 however, the club split the profits; half of all the money raised went to the K.S. committee.²⁰⁶ This was not the first annual event retooled to send money to AIDS causes.

The queer community loves pageantry. Drag shows have always been one of America's most recognizable queer events. Not to be outdone by the queens (and kings), the leather community began putting on pageants of its own. The leather community, basing their pageants on bodybuilding competitions, decided that contests were the way to go. Beginning in 1979, International Mr. Leather (IML) was the first leather contest.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁴ "Houston's Dirty Dozen," *Houston Club Scene*, August 1982, 16.

²⁰⁵ One of the most popular SM fantasies is the Master/slave relationship. At the center of this fantasy is the slave auction. Leatherman and author Joseph W. Bean argues that American slavery might be the basis of the fantasy but has little to do with true ongoing M/s relationships. Joseph W. Bean *Leathersex: A guide for the Curious Outsider and the Serious Player*, (Los Angeles: Daedalus Publishing, 1994), 148. The leather community had been utilizing "slave auctions" as a means of facilitation for fantasy and as fundraising for other gay causes before they were used to raise money for AIDS. In 1976 the Los Angeles police raided a "slave auction" held by the Leather Fraternity to raise money for gay charities of the buyers choosing. "Drummer goes to a Slave Auction," *Drummer* May/June 1976.

²⁰⁶ "Houston's Dirty Dozen," *Houston Club Scene*, August 1982, 16.

²⁰⁷ Lenius "Leather Contests Explained" in *Life, Leather, and the Pursuit of Happiness*, 157.

This sparked leather contests nationwide and worldwide, many acting as qualifying events for IML.

Those who attend an International Mr. Leather contest will find the event more similar to a Ms. America pageant than a drag show. Rather than a swimsuit contest, a more appropriate jockstrap contest happens, along with "pecs and personality," in which the men wear very little and have limited time to answer questions.²⁰⁸ Similarly to the Ms. America pageant International, Mr. Leather is a year-long title in which the winner spends his time promoting the community and doing charity work. The title of International Mr. Leather does not come with scholarship money. Starting just before the onset of the AIDS epidemic, the leather community saw a rapid shift in the men who held the title of International—watching as various IMLs not only indirectly that leather contests raised money for AIDS causes. In some cases, they were the fundraisers themselves.

Born in Yorkshire England in 1929 and living between England and America in the 1970s Alan Selby's most enduring legacy remains Mr. S Leather, a leather and fetish shop that still stands in San Francisco (with an outlet in Denver) even after Selby sold it. His prominence in the San Francisco leather community allowed him to raise money for his community during the AIDS epidemic, and he took it. As a member of the board of the AEF, Selby helped organize various contests to raise money, chief among them the San Francisco Leather Daddy and the San Francisco Leather Daddy's Boy contests. The first Leather Daddy's Boy contest, held in 1983, raised 6,100 dollars for A.E.F.²⁰⁹ The

²⁰⁸ Lenius, "Inside I.M.L.," *Life, Leather, and the Pursuit of Happiness*, 168-169.

²⁰⁹ "Leather Daddy's Boy," *Houston Club Scene*, December 1983.

mid-80s would see the contest grow so much that it would make more than twice that, at one point raising 14,500 dollars for AEF.²¹⁰

While Leather Daddy, Leather Daddy's Boy, and the Houston "slave" auction were by leathermen for the leather community, the scope was not always so narrow. In New York City, a group founded in 1982 Gay Men S.M. Activists (GMSMA) hosted a leather contest; Mr. Leather and the recipients of the funds raised by these events were the very organizations that demonized what the members of SMSMA were doing in their bedrooms. In 1985 Mr. Leather raised \$19,124, which was halved and given to Gay Men's Health Crisis and AIDS Resource Center.²¹¹ This was not the first time that SMSMA raised money for these two organizations; in May of the same year, SMSMA sent \$250 to both organizations.²¹² And then again, in September of 1985, SMSMA sent GMHC. \$100.²¹³ As will be shown in the final section of this chapter, SMSMA did not exist as a fundraising organization, but rather an education organization. Moreover, SMSMA had a support fund for people with AIDS. The decision to give money to those outside the leather and SM community was a deliberate act of community, extending beyond the doors of leather bars and bathhouses.

What all these events had in common was the inherent eroticism at their core. The "slave" auction invited visions of sex to run rampant—and leather contests, with their

²¹⁰ Jones, Jordy, *The Mayor of Folsom Street*, (Springfield: Fair Page Media, 2017), 92.

²¹¹ GMHC. to SMSMA, letter, 13 January 1986, Box 5, Board Correspondence 2, SMSMA, Leather Archive and Museum, Chicago.

²¹² A.R.C. to SMSMA, letter, 21 May 1985, Box 5, Board Correspondence 2, SMSMA, Leather Archive and Museum, Chicago.

GMHC to SMSMA, letter, 1985, Box 5, Board Correspondence 2, SMSMA, Leather Archive and Museum, Chicago.

²¹³ GMHC to SMSMA, Letter, September 1985, Box 5, Board Correspondence 2, SMSMA, Leather Archive and Museum, Chicago.

half-dressed men in fetish clothing, pit sexual fantasies against each other. The description of 1983's Leather Daddy's Boy winner in the *Houston Club Scene* shows this most clearly.

With his clean-cut good looks, come fuck me smile, and that makes me do it look in his eyes, Daddy's Boy Jeff Banks now holds his winner's plaque while even prouder Daddy Robert Scott masterfully holds his prize possession—his boy.²¹⁴

The newsletter assumed that the reader knew the basic goings on of a leather contest (the readership being leathersmen in the Houston area.) Instead, the newsletter let the readers know how Jeff Banks won, and it was, unsurprisingly, because of his sexual appeal. His "good looks" and "come fuck me smile." The sexual appeal is, as it often is in the leather scene, tempered with softness. In this case, the inherent softness of the relationship between a Daddy and his boy. However, even though this softness was sexualized, Robert, as Daddy, was proud of Jeff, his boy. Still, the newsletter described Jeff as a possession of Robert's. The leather and S.M. communities were built on mutual sexual interests and did not see any reason to deviate from this mutual interest when it came to helping their brothers.

Eroticizing Safer Sex.

While Larry Kramer was writing *The Normal Heart*, screaming at gay men to stop having sex or blaming them for killing themselves and their companions with their promiscuity, erotica author Max Exander put pen to paper with a different end in mind. He, too, wanted to change how gay men acted, but the answer for Exander was not to stop having sex but to start being smart about the kinds of sex men were having. In his

²¹⁴ "Leather Daddy's Boy," *Houston Club Scene*, December 1983.

book, *Safestud* Exander took on the role of a diary writer describing a fictional gay man's transition to safer sex. The book, meant for "one-handed reading," also reads very clearly as a manifesto for practices to slow the spread of HIV

Set in 1982, *Safestud* begins with the fear many gay men faced when taking up safer sex practices, asking, "Does this mean I'm not going to have fun anymore?"²¹⁵ Erotica reviewer for *The Bay Area Reporter* promised the answer to this question is a resounding no, "There is sex on every page of *Safestud*, with gallons of cum squirting from the ponderously huge dicks of excessively masculine leathermen and bodybuilders."²¹⁶ Karr saw this kind of book as a new chapter in gay erotica, something video erotica to that point had been lacking. In addition to a safer sex manifesto, the book reads as if Exander meant it to directly answer some of Larry Kramer's biggest criticisms of the gay community and those men who continues to have sex.

The premise of *Safestud* is that it is a diary of Max's growing love for Safer Sex practices in the face of the AIDS Epidemic. Like many books of its genre, it begins with the narrator reminiscing on a sunny Labor Day, looking for sex in the park. The trouble begins immediately as the man Max finds to have sex with stops Max from performing oral sex on him. "I only do safe stuff. . .and that includes not letting anyone else do anything unsafe with me."²¹⁷ This one encounter changes Max's entire outlook. From here, the book details how Max, his friend Chad, and his two lovers, Paul and Eddie, have fun having safer sex. Exander includes all the most popular tropes of the genre:

²¹⁵ Max Exander, *Safestud*, (Boston: Alyson, 1985), 7.

²¹⁶ John Karr "Sex" *Bay Area Reporter*, 15 May 1986.

²¹⁷ Exander, *Safestud*, 9.

anonymous sex, public sex, leather sex, and even an extended slave training scene. All the scenes detail the safer sex practices that the men are using.

One of the strongest arguments Exander made in favor of the eroticism of safer sex is to turn the sex slave fantasy popular across erotica genres and make it an explicitly safer sex trope. Max's friend Chad leaves for Chicago with his Master Dennis, and Max does not hear from him for a long while. This fact is mentioned between Max's sexcapdes and leads some readers to fear that the author is playing into the unsexy trope of dangerous SM men preying on others. However, a month after Chad leaves for Chicago, he returns and gives Max the rundown of his time in Chicago, including a detailed explanation of Chad's training to be a safe sex slave. The ensuing tale includes many touchstones of other sex slave fantasies. The training of safe sex slaves, for example, is the responsibility of safe sex Masters. Other tropes include: the anonymity of the ones doing the training, and of course, a giant orgy at the end of training. Humiliation, however, was at the center of the training of safe sex slave training. "Then, they'd let you cum in your hand and order you to drink your own cum—the only safe cum, they called it— and lick the mess off your hand."²¹⁸ Here the already humiliating act of ingesting one's own ejaculate is coupled with a reminder that this is the only safe way, without reminding the safe sex slave or the reader that they have to give up the much-loved act of ingesting someone *else's* semen.

Exander gave the use of condoms multiple meanings, allowing readers to pick which use resonated most with them. On the one hand, Chad recounts a man telling him

²¹⁸ Exander, 51.

he would "never deserve my master's unsheathed cock."²¹⁹ The reason for the necessity of the condom is ignored, and instead, the condom becomes a piece of erotic equipment similar to a rope or a dildo. On the other hand, Chad tells Max about a man who made him "beg for the privilege to be fucked by a master with a rubber. . . a master who cares."²²⁰ Here the condom similarly serves as an instrument of play while the men engage with the fantasy of Chad being fucked by someone who does not care and would not use a condom. It also allows for the eroticism of condoms in a less intense way than the previous example. True to the genre, *Safestud* makes sure that most fantasies are covered. Finally, Chad tells Max about a pin he earned to wear on his cap or jacket. A silver SSS pin to stand for SafeSexSlave. Dennis returned from Chicago with an SSM pin, SafeSexMaster.²²¹ This off-hand mention of pins and insignias allowed Exander to create a community of safer sex. Were it real, this pin would sit alongside the other pins and patches leathermen wore, denoting the bike and leather clubs they belonged to or the runs they had been on. The fantasy Exander recounts fit squarely into not only the sex lives of the men reading this book, but their social lives as well.

By eroticizing safer sex, Exander's book answered the mainstream, anti-erotic rhetoric of Kramer and Shilts. Max spends the first few pages worried that safer sex means he will have to give up sex, or at least the fun parts, and that he has lost an essential piece of his identity. Very early on, Max decides that that is not the case, "[safe sex] doesn't mean that you're not hot anymore or that the gay community is over. It just

²¹⁹ Exander, 51.

²²⁰ Exander, 51.

²²¹ Exander, 53.

means, well, nothing really."²²² This flies in the face of Kramer's argument that sex is not all there is to the gay community, and in fact, seems to argue that sex *is* all there is to the gay community.

Later in the book Exander detailed a candlelight vigil for those lost to AIDS. This section is one of the very few that are not about sex or philosophizing over safer sex, in addition to showing just how deep the epidemic cut. Even erotica was not free from its horrors, but Max offers an important argument for safer sex. While meditating on death and community, he writes, "I know why we were put on this earth now: to love each other."²²³ It is this drive for love of his brothers that eventually motivates Max to truly throw himself into safer sex.

In his review of *Safesex Stud*, John F. Karr acknowledged that the work of Exander "will never be classified with the work of Phil Andros," an incredibly popular gay erotica author.²²⁴ Still Karr saw Exander's work as part of a push to make written erotica align with safer sex values. Karr suggested that readers reference the publisher's safer sex anthology, *Hot Living: Stories about Safer Sex*.²²⁵ The title of this anthology is telling; a man could have a hot life, but to have safer sex was to continue living. In his review of the book, Karr quoted Exander saying "This is not a non-fiction book, not a how to. . . I think it parallels the experience of many gay men in the last four years. . . it

²²² Exander, 21.

²²³ Exander, 56.

²²⁴ Karr, "Sex," *Bay Area Reporter*, 15 May 1986.

Phil Andros was the pen name of Sam Steward. Steward, among other things, was a history professor, tattoo artist, and radical sex practitioner. His dedication to keeping track of his sex life through index cards he called his Stud File helped Alfred Kinsey with his research. Justin Spring, *The Secret Historian: The Life and Times of Samuel Steward, Processor, Tattoo Artist, and Sexual Renegade* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010).

²²⁵ Karr, "Sex," *Bay Area Reporter*, 15 May 1986.

can be a guide, an inspiration, or affirmation of your experience.”²²⁶ This sentiment was repeated by Karr, and *Safesex Studd* gave men both an inspiration of safer promiscuity as well as an affirmation of their way of life.

There were other ways in which men eroticized safer sex. The newsletter, *The Leather Journal*, kept leathermen aware of the going-ons of clubs nationwide. In August 1988, it published the Hanky Code as codified by a Motorcycle Club in Utica. At the top of the well-known list was a new entry, "Checkered: SAFE SEX." ²²⁷ This addition put safer sex alongside all the other beloved sex acts of leathermen. It allowed for the possibility that it becomes just as important to the community as the black hanky looking for heavy SM or the red hanky looking for fisting.

The eroticism of safer sex in both *Safestud* and the addition to the hanky code relied on the idea of community, safer sex was the duty of one person to the community of his brothers. Max in *Safestud* tells readers this plainly at the end of the book: "... the final realization that so-called *safe sex* wasn't even the real issue, but rather that the fact of assuming my own responsibility for my own behavior and happiness was the thing.”²²⁸ Men who practiced radical sex in safer sex ways regarding HIV/AIDS were often doing just as Kramer pleaded, taking responsibility for their actions. This responsibility was not anything hard for most radical sex partitioners to learn; it was already there in the community.

²²⁶ Karr "Sex" *The Bay Area Reporter*, 15 May 1986.

²²⁷ "Utica Tri's MC" *The Leather Journal*, August-September, 1988, 53.

²²⁸ Exnader, 124.

Safer Sex as a Communal Responsibility

Many men who practiced radical sex were, by the 1980s, ahead of the game. Due to the high risk of injury in activities like impact play and fisting, members of radical sex communities put together groups that focused on education regarding risks and how to play safely. One of the oldest groups, the San Francisco-based Society of Janus, was founded in 1974. Co-founder of the group, Frank Cross, an ex-Catholic priest, told *Drummer* magazine, "We try to tell people to never play over their heads or beyond their skills."²²⁹ In addition to lectures and demonstrations on how to most safely do bondage or impact play, the group also worked to help people build safe play equipment in their homes.²³⁰ It was not hard for radical sex practitioners to add more safety practices in the 1980s.

While the society of Janus is one of the oldest SM groups, it was by no means the only group providing education. In 1981 in New York, Gay Male SM Activists (GMSMA) organized to educate men on how to have safe SM sex and advocated for the SM community in the wider gay community. The group was not started with HIV/AIDS in mind but soon found that the virus was much of what they were educating about. The itinerary handed out to members who attended meetings at the beginning of the organization's life included opportunities to join committees and called for volunteers to help with events and meeting space negotiations.²³¹ However, these meeting handouts slowly changed; by 1985, the group included "Did you see?" sections of the handout to

²²⁹ "The Janus Society," *Drummer*, February 1979, 34.

²³⁰ "The Janus Society," *Drummer*, February 1970, 34.

²³¹ GMSMA, "Notes of Interest" 23 November 1983, ORG 0005 Box 7 C.I.C. "News Notes" "Did You See?" Leather Archive and Museum, Chicago.

keep members up to date with news in the gay community that they might be interested in. City votes on the rights of homosexual teachers were listed next to AIDS activism.²³² A year later, the "Did You See?" section overflowed with news about AIDS locally and globally; from San Francisco to Uganda, GMSMA kept its members in the loop as much as possible where AIDS was concerned.²³³ This was one of many ways that GMSMA worked to keep its members educated.

In addition to handing out material at the beginning of meetings, GMSMA published a newsletter called *Newslink*. While this newsletter provided information about the group, its meetings, and other events, it offered occasional short stories or advice on how to do sexual activities safely. What was missing from *Newslink* were personal ads, which was part of almost every other gay publication. From the outset, GMSMA decided that personal ads would not benefit the group at large. In a letter to a frustrated member David, the steering committee chairman pointed out the numerous other places members could place personal ads, instead suggesting that the member might make friends and meet other men if he spoke up during meetings and pitched in at events.²³⁴ While the reasons given in the letter to the frustrated member are practical: other gay periodicals had larger readerships and GMSMA gave men the chance of meeting before sex was ever on the table. The lack of personal ads in *Newslink* showed GMSMA's commitment to building a community and making sex safer.

²³² G. M.S.M.A. "News Notes," 10 April 1985, ORG 0005, Box 7 C.I.C. "News Notes" "Did you See?" Leather Archive and Museum, Chicago.

²³³ G. M.S.M.A. "News Notes," 8 October 1985, ORG 0005, Box 7 C.I.C. "News Notes" "Did you See?" Leather Archive and Museum, Chicago.

²³⁴ David S to Will R, letter, 16 February 1982, ORG 0005, Box 5, Board Correspondence, Leather Archive and Museum, Chicago.

In 1983 GMSMA began publishing about AIDS. The group published its first article on AIDS in April of 1983, a month after Kramer's "1,112 and Counting." This article, titled "Medical Discipline," gave incredibly rudimentary information about AIDS, explaining the acronym and defining the words acquired, immune, deficiency, and syndrome. Then the article gave incredibly dim statistics: every man who had received a firm diagnosis died within two years, and AIDS was not reversible. In addition to this information, GMSMA published recommendations to gay men on how to keep themselves safe. The first item on the list was to limit the number of sexual partners one has.²³⁵ The author, Leonard, did not tell his readers to be scared. Instead, he laid out the facts, which would likely scare anyone, and then told gay men what the current medical advice was to keep them safe. Leonard, instead of asking readers how they could "value life so little and cocks and asses so much?" recognized the place that "cocks and asses" played in the lives of members of GMSMA.²³⁶ Moreover, GMSMA, through Leonard's article, gave recommendations to men long before Kramer's group Gay Men's Health Crisis did. The lack of recommendations from GMHC lead in part to Kramer leaving the group.

As the epidemic wore on, *Newslink* and GMSMA provided men with better information to keep themselves safe. By 1985 *Newslink* was publishing much more in-depth articles, telling men to avoid exchanging bodily fluids and to try activities with little or no risk of HIV infection, like bondage or hot wax. Finally, GMSMA suggested that men entirely stop "riskier activities," listing fisting, piss, scat, and piercing,

²³⁵ Leonard B, "Medical Discipline," *Newslink*, April 1983.

²³⁶ Kramer, "1112 and Counting" *Reports from the Holocaust: The Making of an AIDS Activist*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 46.

conceding that if a man *must* participate in these activities, he does so with few others and only those he knew well enough to trust that they are being as safe as possible.²³⁷ Eventually, everyone would recognize that fisting carries minimal risk of infection, particularly when the penetrating partner wears gloves. However, GMSMA, and the commitment to community safety and health, was willing to tell men to stop an incredibly popular and well-loved activity. Safety was at the core of the community; sometimes, that meant telling men to keep safety sheers near the bed when doing a bondage scene, and sometimes that meant telling men that fisting was not safe if they wanted to avoid HIV.

A second group, one that would have rolled their eyes at the suggestion that they stop fisting, was Mid America Fists in Action (MAFIA). These men worked hard to make fisting as safe as possible. One of the ways that the group did this was during play parties hosted by the group; MAFIA gave each member attending their own can of Crisco. Used as the lubricant that facilitated the act of inserting a fist, MAFIA helped reduce the risk of spreading HIV by ensuring bottoms did not share Crisco. The recommendation of rubber gloves (assuming men changed gloves as they changed partners) significantly reduced the risk of HIV infection through fisting.²³⁸ This small detail highlights the importance of safety to the group. The 1987 February party saw a few rule changes. Hosted at the Chicago Hellfire Club's clubhouse, MAFIA had to accommodate the rules of their host. MAFIA had to abandon the well-loved Crisco due to a Hellfire rule requiring the use of a water-soluble lube.²³⁹ Chicago Hellfire, one of America's oldest and most exclusive

²³⁷ Leonard B, "S/M in the Age of A.D.I.S.," *Newslink*, August 1985.

²³⁸ MAFIA Party Application, *MAFIA News*, August 1986.

²³⁹ MAFIA Party, *Mafia News*, January/February 1987.

leather fraternities, likely put this rule in place because water-soluble lube is safe to use with condoms where other lubes, Crisco included, would break down the rubber of condoms. This rule, however, produced a significant financial burden to all involved due to the cost; water-soluble lube was more expensive than Crisco. Chicago Hellfire, moreover, *required* rather than suggested the use of gloves and condoms. MAFIA, however, commented that this should be fine since most members already do this.²⁴⁰ Between the two clubs, MAFIA and Chicago Hellfire, there is very little doubt that safety was just as important as having fun regarding sexual activity.

In addition to the focal point of safety in radical sex communities, when the AIDS epidemic required a new look at what made sex safer, many in the leather and S.M. communities were quick to point out that much of S.M. was *already* safer sex. In May of 1986, *Dungeon Master*, a gay S.M. magazine specializing in how-to articles, began with a five-page article titled "S.M. is Safe Sex." This article listed various sexual activities and advice on making them safer. This included snarkily providing advice where other safer sex guides simply tell men to stop participating in some activities. Impact play, electricity, and nipple play were all given the green light as activities that, unless they break the skin, are safe from HIV infection.²⁴¹ The only activity that *Dungeon Master* took off the table entirely was rimming, "I don't know of anyone who can do it to himself. And I doubt that it would be much fun though an impervious membrane, even if you could find an appropriate one."²⁴² While this article pointed out how safer sex practices can make S.M. *safer* than normative homosexual sex, one only has to look through

²⁴⁰ MAFIA Party, *Mafia News*, January/February 1987.

²⁴¹ "S.M. is Safe Sex," *Dungeon Master*, May 1986, 1-5.

²⁴² "S.M. is Safe Sex," *Dungeon Master*, May 1986, 4.

multiple editions of *Dungeon Master* to come to this conclusion. From 1979 to 1987, in 32 issues, rarely was there a depiction of anal sex, the single activity most responsible for spreading HIV among gay men. It was so rare that it happened only twice. This flew in the face of mainstream safer sex activism which had placed SM sex, fisting chief among them, as the fastest way to spread HIV. Despite this onslaught against radical sex from the gay community, radical sex practitioners simply added rubber gloves, careful sterilization, and innovative play techniques to safety shears, non-beeswax candles, and fingernail clippers as ways to make radical sex as safe as possible.

Committees of radical sex practitioners responded to the AIDS pandemic in the same way they responded to other safety concerns. The community had no qualms about advising each other on how to have sex safely. A community-based approach necessitated telling men what they should or should not do if they wanted to reduce the chance of HIV infection. Groups like GMHC could not give similar recommendations because their approach was not grounded in a community that acted like a community.

In the face of rhetoric like that extended by men like Shilts and Kramer, radical sex communities did what they had always done, took care of each other. While this usually focused on continuing to make sex safer, it also meant community building. In the earliest years of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, MAFIA saw that some men did not feel comfortable participating in a once-loved activity even with the most up-to-date safety information. Instead of watching membership fall due to this, MAFIA began hosting socials where there was no sex. Further, the board of directors asserted that MAFIA was a

group of "men who are deeper than you think!" They promised men that this community was not going anywhere even *if* a man caught AIDS.²⁴³

While some of the mainstream gay community's loudest voices called radical sex practitioners careless and short-sighted and blamed them for their deaths, radical sex practitioners fell back on two essential parts of their community: safety and brotherhood. These communities were deeply concerned with keeping themselves informed and caring for each other if the worst happened. Education took, to the mainstream eye, unorthodox forms. Where many gay men came to see sex as a death sentence, these communities clung to the eroticism of a leather-clad body and used that image to raise money and help spread safer sex practices. All this they did while only occasionally throwing shade at mainstream gay men, and even then, they were willing to lend a hand to support mainstream organizations and events for the sake and safety of all their brothers. **CONCLUSION "RIGHTEOUS ANGER, CAREFUL CAUTION, PREPARATION, AND ABOVE ALL COMPLETE COMPASSION:**

I want to say that once,
I saw him dressed in leather,
Leaning on a fence,
Inside a bar, rather,
"Breakfast with Thom Gunn" Randall Mann

"Some of Us are Dying," shouted June 1983's *Drummer Magazine*. Immediately following a piece on foreskin fetishists, "Some of Us Are Dying" was originally a speech given in May of that year by John Preston, a well-known erotica author and activist. "It is

²⁴³ Donovan F. Ash "You, MAFIA, and AIDS" *MAFIA Newsletter*, April 1984.

making us scared of one another, and it is leading us to make unforgivable judgments on one another.”²⁴⁴ This speech, given a month after Kramer’s “1,112 and Counting” was printed, was a more level-headed call to the gay community. “We have to respond with righteous anger, careful caution, through preparation and above all complete compassion,” was Preston’s closing remark.²⁴⁵ This measured response reads like a direct response to Larry Kramer’s “How can they value life so little and cocks and asses so much.”²⁴⁶ The leather community led the way in advocating for safer and pleasurable sex during the crisis. This was misconstrued by the rest of the community as not caring for those who were dead or dying.

The discourse around eroticism that gay men were participating in during the pandemic did not begin with the first men dying of AIDS. Leathermen found community in the eroticism of masculinity. Bars and clubs facilitated a particular masculinity that invited and relied upon eroticization. This community faced backlash from both the heterosexual world and their own gay brothers. The stigma leathermen faced strengthened the bond of brotherhood, a bond that would prove important as the pandemic set in.

Anti-eroticism did not begin with the AIDS pandemic either, instead it took root in the decade before, as a reaction to the sexual liberation of gay men. The anti-eroticism of the 1970s expressed itself as a hatred of sex, even in works that seemed like they were sexually progressive like John Rechy’s *The Sexual Outlaw*, which praised promiscuity but

²⁴⁴ John Preston, “Some of Us Are Dying,” *Drummer* June 1983.

²⁴⁵ Preston, “Some of Us are Dying,” *Drummer*, June 1983.

²⁴⁶ Larry Kramer “1112 and Counting,” *Reports from the Holocaust: The Making of an AIDS Activist*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989), 46.

demonized SM, leather and fisting. This position however was polarized by Larry Kramer's *Faggots*, a novel which placed the lone gay man looking for love as a hero among degenerate gay men who cared for nothing but sex. These authors suffered from an inability to see past the trappings of SM and leather to the intimacy required to take part in radical sex.

When the pandemic set in, anti-eroticism got louder, and the stakes rose. As men were dying, Larry Kramer and Randy Shilts used anti-eroticism to place radical sex at the center of the pandemic as a contributor to AIDS. In his essays and plays, Kramer argued that men who did not give up sex were the issue, he could see no use for sex at the time. Shilts not only demonized promiscuity but placed the blame of the pandemic at the feet of Gaetan Dugas, a gay man who did nothing other gay men were not already doing. Not only were Kramer and Shilts putting an undeserved burden on radical sex communities, but they were also falsely equating safer sex with monogamy. An assertion of "common sense" that codified heteronormativity upheld this push for monogamy.²⁴⁷

Despite the very loud and popular reaction to the AIDS crisis of Kramer and Shilts, they did not represent the only response. Leathermen and other radical sex communities found ways to utilize the eroticism inherent to their communities to raise money for various AIDS causes and educate the communities at large on how to have safer sex regarding HIV transmission. Unlike mainstream organizations like GMHC, groups like MAFIA or publications like *Dungeon Master*, had no qualms telling men the safest ways to have sex. Because of the blinders the mainstream community had

²⁴⁷Douglas Crimp, "How to have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," *AIDS Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, Winter 1987, 237-271.

regarding SM, leather, and fisting they were unaware of the ingrained sense of responsibility and safety of radical sex practitioners.

The focus on anti-eroticism by men like Larry Kramer and Randy Shilts had far reaching consequences. There were few gay men that had as much sway on mainstream gay activism as these two men. As the AIDS pandemic transitioned to the AIDS endemic Kramer wrote two more plays about the crisis. *Just Say No, A Play about Farce* in 1988, and a sequel to *The Normal Heart*, called *The Destiny of Me* in 1992. Both pushed the same monogamy anti-erotic lines that *The Normal Heart* and *Faggots* did. Shilts, following the success of *And the Band Played On*, published *Conduct Unbecoming: Gays and Lesbians In the US Military From Vietnam to the Persian Gulf* in 1993. As apathy for AIDS set in and the calendar turned to the new millennium, the community picked up two new fights, the fight for marriage equality and discrimination against gays and lesbians in the military. Both of these fights are rooted in the same “common sense” arguments Douglas Crimp identified in Kramer and Shilt’s work during the AIDS Pandemic.²⁴⁸

This study has had its limitations. The focus has been entirely on middle class white gay men. This focus has been two-fold. First, these are the most visible of the community, men who have the money to buy leather garments or go to the theater. This visibility does not make them the most important or worthy of study, instead it offers a beginning for a subject that lacks study. Secondly by focusing on the most visible members of a minority community, a non-normative space has been made normative. By

²⁴⁸ Douglas Crimp, “How to have Promiscuity in an Epidemic,” *AIDS Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, Winter 1987, 237-271.

treating the gay community as a normative space, particular community dynamics become apparent. The nuances of Kramer's arguments would be more difficult to flesh out if the project had not ignored the heterosexual norm.

Additionally, this study opens doors to further research. The work of leathermen during the crisis deserves a much longer look. The foundations of Folsom Street Fair, one of California's largest events, lie in AIDS activism. This is one of the most recognizable ways that the leather community used eroticism to raise money for AIDS causes. In 1987 the second National March on Washington for Gay and Lesbian Rights was held, and standing alongside all the other interest groups was the SM interest group.²⁴⁹ Unlike the other ways in which radical sex communities fund raised, and educated, the March on Washington was not inherently erotic. Rather this signifies radical sex stepping into normative activist spaces.

Anti-eroticism continues to plague the queer community. Every year, usually beginning in May, discussions of the appropriateness of "kink at pride" explode through internet communities.²⁵⁰ While the queer community argues about whether or not men in leather harnesses and pup masks should be allowed to march in parades sponsored by Lockheed Martin, the legality of drag shows is being debated in state legislatures. The passage of gay marriage, which had support from some members of the leather community, did not end homophobia, and instead invented a new way for bakers and city

²⁴⁹ "Washington Coverage" *Newslink*, Winter 1988.

²⁵⁰ Christine Gabriel, "'No Kink at Pride': What the Discourse Leaves Out about LGBTQ+ History," *OUT* April 15 2022, <https://www.out.com/commentary/2022/4/15/no-kink-pride-what-discourse-leaves-out-about-lgbtq-history#toggle-gdpr>

clerks to assert their homophobia.²⁵¹ It is hard to imagine that excluding a community which preceded the event marked by Pride by at least 15 years, would help alleviate any tension. Instead, these arguments rationalize arguments which seek to eradicate other pieces of queer culture.

The wake of the AIDS pandemic has left a new community which often carries the brunt of anti-eroticism, even from other radical sex communities. Barebacking, the practice of gay men having unprotected sex with the chance of HIV transmission, is a highly contentious practice. In his ethnographic study of barebacking, both the practice and the community, Tim Dean describes an intimacy similar to that described as the center of the leather community. The very center of barebacking is the precipice of life and death.²⁵² Where SM plays with life and death in a controlled fashion, barebacking leaves it to chance. The eroticization of a virus which killed thousands of gay men, and continues to move through the community, is something many gay men find incredibly distasteful.²⁵³ This argument, unknowingly parallels Rechy's argument, that SM is no different from the violence enacted on the queer community by the police.

In 1996, on the precipice of antiretroviral therapy, a set of drugs that when accessible lengthens the lives of people with AIDS, International Mr. Leather Joe Gallagher told his new brothers "Love hard, but Love!"²⁵⁴ Would that this advice been

²⁵¹ In 1996 Barry Douglas, a member of GMSMA's executive board, spoke at an event rallying support for marriage equality. *Newslink*, Summer 1996, GMSMA, Leather Archive and Museum, Chicago.

²⁵² Tim Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009), 6.

²⁵³ Zachary Willmore @zachwillmore, "I had No Idea People Could Be That Sick," TikTok, 27 February, 2023.

²⁵⁴ Fred Michmerschuizen, "An Interview with International Mr. Leather," *Newslink*, Winter 1996-1997, GMSMA Papers, Leather Archive and Museum, Chicago, IL.

broadcasted to the entire community a decade before. Leathermen and SM practitioners were intimately attuned to this philosophy; what outsiders saw as abuse, or assault, was actually an intimate show of love and trust. The ability to "love hard" produced a culture of safety which equipped radical sex practitioners to at least pass on information and change behavior during the AIDS pandemic.

It is impossible to know how many of the 330,000 gay or bisexual men who have died of AIDS since the 1980s might have taken up space along the walls of leather bars, or filled boots which have since fallen into disrepair.²⁵⁵ Similarly it is impossible to know the extent to which anti-eroticism perpetuated harm during the crisis. For all the possible deaths that men like Kramer and Shilts might have been responsible for, the United States government, from the president, to the FDA, Congress to the CDC, are responsible for many, many more.

²⁵⁵ CDC citation

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