

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF MEMORIALISING SEX, THE DYING AND THE DEAD IN HIV/AIDS

DRAMA: LARRY KRAMER'S *THE NORMAL HEART* AND WILLIAM HOFFMAN'S *As Is*

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Douglas Crimp argues that in the early years of the HIV/AIDS epidemic there were essentially two standard mechanisms for artistic responses to the epidemic: raising money or producing creative work that 'expresses the human suffering and loss'.¹ The latter artistic response is a shift that David Roman identifies as 'a strategic intervention in the battles surrounding the representations of gay male identity and AIDS'.² The narratives of gay male authors in New York City depicted an era of open sexuality, starting from the period immediately after the 1969 Stonewall riots, where the doors for inclusion into American society opened to them for the first time. But that invitation appeared to be very short-lived with the inception of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

The argument is presented in this article that the authors were divided on how to responsibly project the memory of promiscuous sex within gay relationships in an era of AIDS. The texts revealed a strong disconnect amongst writers in the New York

¹ Douglas Crimp, 'AIDS: Cultural Analysis / Cultural Activism', in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis / Cultural Activism*, ed. by Douglas Crimp (Cambridge: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1988), pp. 3-16 (p. 3).

² David Roman, "'It's My Party and I'll Die If I Want To!': Gay Men, AIDS, and the Circulation of Camp in U.S. Theatre", *Theatre Journal*, 44 (1992), 305-27 (p. 306).

community; there were those who believed that sexual representation of the gay community was essential in the wake of the epidemic, whilst others felt that continued support of this form of representation was promoting the death of the gay community. With the introduction of the AIDS epidemic in New York City, promiscuity, and depictions of libertine sexual activity, took centre stage in the debate about gay identity and representation. Whilst one camp of writers lamented the celebration of promiscuity in the wake of AIDS, others staunchly defended it, arguing that it was the foundation of gay identity in the age of liberation, following centuries of systematic abuse, cultural suppression, imprisonment and oppression of gay men at the behest of a heterosexual Christian American society. The onset of the epidemic marks the change in which AIDS appeared to redirect much of the topical direction of queer drama and literature produced at the time. Even though it is inaccurate to state that the entirety of the literature produced by gay men had completely transmuted to project the urgency of the AIDS epidemic, the celebration of sexual freedoms and libertine sexuality that Larry Kramer criticised in his novel, *Faggots* (1978), was now impossible to depict without acknowledging that the epidemic was spiralling out of control. Pre-AIDS novels such as Kramer's *Faggots* and Andrew Holleran's *Dancer from the Dance* (1978) tackled the newfound responsibilities of artistically depicting the contemporary conditions of the gay community; additionally, the narratives seemed to be aware of the necessity of

balancing self-representation while mitigating the consequences of misinterpretation from prospective audiences, particularly the newfound engagement with the heterosexual monolith. Kramer's reflection on his foray into activism - both at a literary and grassroots level - provides an astute, emotional assessment on what inspired artists in the 1980s to respond to the epidemic through creative means: 'No one involved in fighting AIDS does so without the constantly insistent, haunting, painful memories of too many friends who aren't here anymore'.³

The reason for selecting plays as a medium for inquiry into the topic of representation reflects the reality that the earliest artistic depictions of the HIV/AIDS epidemic emerged through theatre. The two plays considered in this article - Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* (1985) and William Hoffman's *As Is* (1985) - are widely considered to be the first representations to emerge in response to the epidemic. The ideas, attitudes and concerns about the effects of representation will be assessed with a measure of interiority (within the gay community) and exteriority (the perception of these representations from outsiders, namely mass media and the general population). This construction respects the boundaries defined by sociologist Maurice Halbwach in which he recognised that within all groups of individuals there are two recognizable

³ Larry Kramer, *Reports from the Holocaust: The Making of an AIDS Activist* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), p. xiv.

components: collective acts and representations.⁴ The concept of representation is best defined by Gabriele Griffin as ‘a cultural (re)production and imaging, and about the desire to create a presence, to achieve visibility and recognition, to participate [...] in public debates.’⁵ Thus, the criticality and urgency to address the epidemic was largely heightened by the infancy of open gay identity as it pertained to its newfound visibility within the public sphere, which existed for just over a decade.

The era of gay narratives before AIDS

In the decades before 1969 in the United States, sexual orientation outside of heterosexuality was essentially restricted to the closet. Psychiatrists and medical professionals approached homosexuality as a disease that needed to be treated and cured until 1973 when the American Psychiatric Association declassified it as a mental disorder.⁶ Additionally, the issue of illegality was also a factor in twenty-nine U.S. states,

⁴ Halbwach defined collective memory as ‘revolving about men in association about groups and their complex organization, gives the human consciousness access to all that has been achieved in the way of thought and feeling attitudes and mental dispositions in the diverse social groups in which it has its being.’ See Maurice Halbwach, ‘Individual Consciousness and the Collective Mind’, *American Journal of Sociology*, 44 (1939), 812-822 (p. 822); Paul Ricoeur describes this in simpler terms constructing it as a variation of ‘my memory of a given event’ versus ‘our memory of the same given event.’ See Paul Ricoeur, *La Memoire, l’histoire, et l’oubli* (Paris: L’Ordre Philosophique-Editions du Seuil, 2000), p.158.

⁵ Gabriele Griffin, *Representations of HIV and AIDS: Visibility Blue/s* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 2001), p. 4.

⁶ David R. Kessler M.D., *Testimony to the American Psychiatric Association on Proposed Revision of the U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act Us House of Representatives* (Washington D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, 1982), pp. 1-2.

and the District of Columbia, which imposed criminal penalties on consenting adults who engaged in acts of sodomy.⁷ These laws were upheld in the 1986 Supreme Court ruling *Bowers v. Hardwick* (478 U.S. 186) and were eventually overturned as unconstitutional in the 2003 *Lawrence v. Texas* (539 U.S. 558) ruling.⁸ Prior to the reversal of these medical and legislative restrictions, many gay men and lesbians in the country felt forced to lead “closeted” lives, conducting same-sex socialisation away from prying public eyes to avoid arrest, incarceration or institutionalisation. However, for gay New Yorkers, several continuous nights of civil disobedience at the Stonewall Inn prompted a movement to take place in public spheres.

While it is often reported that the Stonewall riots were the first act of defiance against police brutality towards gays in New York City, it was the continued momentum of activism set forth after the event, which allowed the demonstration to be reminisced as the quintessential marker of the gay rights movement. Armstrong and Cragge observe that it achieved this by being ‘the first commemorable event to occur at a time and place where activists had enough capacity to produce a commemorative vehicle - that

⁷ Ronald W. Hook, ‘The Constitutional Right of Privacy: Sodomy Laws’ ed. by Former MCLU Legal Counsel (Minneapolis: Minnesota Civil Liberties Union Foundation, 1981), pp. 1-13 (p. 2).

⁸ See Supreme Court of the United States *Bowers v. Hardwick* (No. 85-140) 760 F.2d 1202, reversed and *Lawrence v. Texas* (02-102) 539 U.S. 558 (2002) 41 S.W. 3d 349, reversed and remanded.

is, where gay activists had adequate *mnemonic capacity*.⁹ The Stonewall riots symbolised the commencement of an irreversible liberation movement – in both the literary and cultural capacity – and was able to attain momentary reprieve for citizens who had suffered under centuries of legislated tyranny. However, if history marked Stonewall as the beginning of gay liberation in the United States, then it also marked it as the emergence of a new, public queer identity movement in literature. Gay writers attained greater visibility and their works reflected a desire to contribute an individualistic interpretation of the experience of being gay in New York City. Catherine Davies argues – specifically in regards to writers of epic poetry in pursuit of Walt Whitman’s canon of queer poetics – that many of these writings ‘bear witness to a notable drive in American literature, if not in its legislation, to integrate same-sex desire into a vision of the nation.’¹⁰ In this vein, the discussion proposes that writers were not divided on the necessity of publicising their experiences via a literary platform, but rather the consequences of doing so.

As the AIDS epidemic was unfolding during the early 1980s, President Ronald Reagan, the elected Republican leader, did not mention the word, AIDS, once until 1987, when

⁹ Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Suzanna M. Crage, ‘Movements and Memory: The Making of the Stonewall Inn’, *American Sociological Review*, 71 (2006), 724-51 (p. 725).

¹⁰ Catherine Davies, *Whitman’s Queer Children: America’s Homosexual Epics* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic Publishing, 2012), p. 23.

36,058 Americans had been diagnosed with the disease and 20,849 had already died.¹¹

Despite the Reagan administration's eerie silence on AIDS, the laws in place, protected by the First Amendment, allowed for the dissemination of information as run by grassroots efforts led by AIDS writers and activists.¹² While the mainstream press in the United States provided coverage, ridden with negative metaphors fuelling the concerns of an already panicked population, alternative publications in New York City concentrated on publishing information for a targeted readership, particularly gay men who were seeking constructive discourse on how the disease was affecting the community. Paula Treichler presents a compelling argument that the social dimensions of the AIDS epidemic are 'far more pervasive and central' when taking account the historical trajectory of the disease in relation to the biological functionality.¹³ Therefore, returning to Douglas Crimp's aforementioned assertion, the response to the epidemic via artistic means was largely derived to attack the pervasive homophobic narratives and advocate the inclusion of gay men and women into an unaccepting society.

¹¹ Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On: Politics, People and the AIDS Epidemic* (London: Penguin, 1987), p. 596.

¹² US Constitution Amendment 1: Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

¹³ Paula Treichler, 'AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification', in *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic: Cultural Chronicles of AIDS*, ed. by? (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999) pp. 11-41, p. 15.

On 3 July 1981, the CDC's *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* (MMWR) published what is regarded as the first government documentation of the epidemic in the United States. This report contained the first descriptors of the nature of the disease but it was attention to the sexual orientation and narcotic habits of the patients that garnered national attention. That same day, both the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* picked up on the MMWR report that an immune compromising disease with symptoms including Kaposi's Sarcoma, Pneumocystis, and Toxoplasmosis was *exclusive* to gay men in metropolitan areas of New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles.¹⁴ A December 1981 article in the *New England Journal of Medicine* emphasised that the four patients at the centre of the study 'presented a unique and unusual clinical syndrome' and observed that 'the fact that this illness was first observed in homosexuals is probably not due to coincidence.'¹⁵ These initial stories succeeded in driving the idea to the public that this new epidemic seemed to be a solely gay problem caused by a highly mobile and sexual group of individuals and did not pose a threat to heterosexuals in America. The sensationalist forms of representation that unfolded in the media allowed for deep seeded homophobia in America to surface to a visibly public sphere. The detrimental

¹⁴ Lawrence K. Altman, 'Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals', *New York Times*, 3 July, 1981, p. A20; Harry Nelson, 'Second Deadly Ailment Linked to Homosexuals', *Los Angeles Times*, 3 July 1981, p. A3.

¹⁵ Michael S. Gottlieb M.D., Robert Schroff, Ph.D., Howard M. Schanker, M.D., Joel D. Weisman, D.O., Peng Tim Fan, M.D., Robert A. Wolf, M.D., and Andrew Saxon, M.D., 'Pneumocystis Carinii Pneumonia and Mucosal Candidiasis in Previously Healthy Homosexual Men — Evidence of a New Acquired Cellular Immunodeficiency', *The New England Journal of Medicine*, 305 (1981), 1425-1431 (pp.1428, 1429).

narratives emanating from the press combined with the absolute mortality of the disease and the devastatingly high percentage of gay men afflicted in New York City meant that the epidemic left an indelible impression on both the gay community and gay narratives.

Larry Kramer confronts the monolith in *The Normal Heart*

In terms of inciting discourse about representation of queer identify in post-Stonewall narratives, few writers invoked as intense debate as writer and activist Larry Kramer. Kramer's experience and eventual ouster from the first AIDS response organisation he founded, the Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC), combined with his frustration with lagging city efforts to combat the epidemic, served as the inspiration for the creation of his play, *The Normal Heart*. The play is essentially a semi-autobiographical account of his experiences as a young, openly gay community activist at odds with the city, trying to obtain funding for the disease. Though it retained Kramer's rhetorical and polemic agency (as projected in *Faggots*), the play's vision was not restricted to exploring the complexities of gay relationships but broadened to represent his experience navigating between homosexuality and homophobia in society as revealed by the epidemic. As Richard Goldstein observes, devotion and camaraderie among the gay characters in the

play 'is the ideal poised against the twin realities of promiscuity and hostility from the world at large'.¹⁶

The story follows Ned Weeks, a gay community activist fighting the city council for funding to fight the disease as many members of his close circle of friends are beginning to show various symptoms of the disease. In the following passage Ned accuses his heterosexual lawyer brother of supporting the monolithic homophobic societal structure by not doing enough to support him and his friends during this urgent time of struggle.

NED I'm beginning to think you and your straight world are our enemy. I'm trying to understand why nobody wants to hear we're dying, why nobody wants to help, why my own brother doesn't want to help. Two million dollars – for a house! We can't even get twenty-nine cents from the city. You think I'm sick, and I simply cannot allow that any longer. I am furious with you, and with myself and with every goddamned doctor who ever told me I'm sick and interfered with my loving a man. I will not speak to you again until you accept me as your equal. Your healthy equal. Your brother.¹⁷

Ned's accusation implicitly suggests that his 'war' has dualistic goals: inclusion into society for those in same sex relationships and treatment for the infected; secondly, his

¹⁶ Richard Goldstein, 'The Implicated and the Immune: Cultural Responses to AIDS', *The Milbank Quarterly*, 68 (1990), 295-319 (p. 308).

¹⁷ Larry Kramer, *The Normal Heart* (London: Methuen Publishing, 1985), pp. 37-38.

assertion that 'nobody wants to help' is effective in confirming that the general population was aware of the epidemic but refused to respond most likely because of collective blame on gay men for the spread of disease. One of the most consistent themes in Kramer's work is the comparison of the national reaction to the AIDS epidemic to the complacent reaction of ordinary European citizens during the Holocaust. The realities of its destruction clearly informed Kramer's consciousness. He wrote of the moment he envisioned the play: 'It was while I was Germany, while visiting Dachau, that the thoughts began to coalesce into what would shortly become my play *The Normal Heart*.'¹⁸ On this issue, Michael Sherry writes, 'the language of war-and-holocaust highlighted human causation and the state's agency – for human responsibility and state power are central to the experience of war – and it justified extreme action to challenge or shape state power'.¹⁹ As Samantha Power notes, genocide is an act of war, but what is at question in her essay is whether inaction equates to deliberate action.²⁰ Ned is very clear that he feels that the tepid response to the AIDS epidemic means that 'you and your straight world are our enemy' due to the fact that people seemed complacent to the rising infections and death. But to argue that

¹⁸ Kramer, *Reports from the Holocaust*, p. 66

¹⁹ Michael S. Sherry, 'The Language of War in AIDS Discourse', in *Writing AIDS: Gay Literature, Language and Analysis*, ed. by Timothy F. Murphy and Suzanne Poirier (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 39-53, p. 44.

²⁰ Samantha Power, 'Never Again: The World's Most Unfulfilled Promise', *Frontline* 2001<
<http://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=samantha+power+never+again&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8> > [accessed 13 May 2010].

the AIDS epidemic is analogous to the Holocaust has been a very problematic assertion for Kramer in the past because the Holocaust was initiated by a deliberate order to rid Europe of its Jewish citizens. In one of the most damning criticisms of Kramer's approach, Jurg Mahner argues:

We are not under the threat of being wiped out as a community. The Holocaust atmosphere Larry is creating in his article I consider as dangerous. [...] We have a health problem on an impressive scale. But it was not designed by evil forces to destroy us and nobody talks about herding us into camps or to put triangles on our bomber-jackets...²¹

Kramer's use of the Holocaust as a metaphor for the AIDS epidemic served to contextualise destructive capability of the HIV virus on the body and its divisive role in society. Kramer defends his position through his character by demonstrating that it is accurate to place the scale of the destruction in context; however, it ultimately accomplished is the appropriation of blame and the identification of victims.

The text is intentionally polemical in its approach. Kramer's theatre is one of confrontation: to pit the characters on stage in heated dialogue and place the audience in an uncomfortable position. But this confrontation is more than just an artistic

²¹ Thomas L. Long, *AIDS and American Apocalypticism: The Cultural Semiotics of an Epidemic* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), pp. 90-91.

gesture. *The Normal Heart* harmonised the emotive and polemic elements of individual memory – an unambiguous attribute of Larry Kramer’s personality, artistic style, and conviction to dramatise activism. Upon its opening in 1985, Frank Rich described the production as ‘angry,’ ‘furious,’ ‘unflagging,’ and ‘outspoken’.²²

Thus, his remembrance of the events leading up to his play reflects how collective memory cannot be embodied in the writing of one individual. Kramer’s version of the events *is inspired by* his personal experience. This play also pushed a renewed plea that promiscuous sex among gay men stop in the wake of the epidemic. Through the character Dr Emma Brookner, Kramer utilises a medical narrative to enforce the idea that sex was going to obliterate the gay community.

EMMA Yes. And before a vaccine can be discovered almost every gay man will have been exposed. Ned, your organisation is worthless! I went up and down Christopher Street last night and all I saw was guys going in the bars alone and coming out with somebody. And outside the baths, all I saw was lines of guys going in.... Why aren’t you telling them, bluntly, stop! Every day you don’t tell them, more people infect each other.²³

Despite the fact that the virus is capable of infecting any human, representation of the HIV/AIDS epidemic maintained itself as a gendered affair in the works by gay men. I

²² Frank Rich, ‘Theater: *The Normal Heart*, by Larry Kramer’, *The New York Times*, 22 April 1985.

²³ Larry Kramer, *The Normal Heart*, p. 44.

posit that the inclusion of Emma served to represent the voice of the medical community, supporting Kramer's sense of biological urgency AIDS presented rather than its function to present a feminist narrative in his play. By projecting her forceful narrative onstage, he reaffirmed his commitment to ending the association between promiscuity and gay identity, particularly in the wake of this epidemic. Joel Shatzky observed in regards to the play's reception that, 'unlike many plays that are judged on the basis of aesthetic qualities [...] *The Normal Heart* had created an audience that attended as much to the political and social content'.²⁴ Douglas Crimp accused Kramer of catering for heterosexual audiences by exploiting a pro-monogamy narrative in the midst of the epidemic thus exhibiting his continued 'ignorance and contempt for the gay movement'.²⁵ Simon Watney echoed the concern that the criticism of promiscuity was to shore up the promotion of heterosexuality. He argues:

The entire discourse of AIDS turns round the rhetorical figure of "promiscuity" [...] What we read is a literature of containment, endlessly policing human sexuality, as if the powers of the police themselves were insufficient to contain the dangers of deviance, henceforth to be branded indelibly with the ideological skull-and-crossbones sign of AIDS.²⁶

²⁴ Joel Shatzky, 'AIDS Enters the American Theatre: *As Is* and the *Normal Heart*', in *AIDS: The Literary Response*, ed. by Emmanuel S. Nelson (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992, 131-39 (p. 132).

²⁵ Douglas Crimp, 'How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic', *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, 43 (Winter 1987), 237-271, p. 247.

²⁶ Simon Watney, *Policing Desire: Pornography AIDS and the Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp. 12-13.

At the centre of the debate was the representation of promiscuity within these narratives, a division that Mark Turner identifies as ‘the right to fuck many people – promiscuity rather than monogamy – was not an agreed right by all gay men who wrote about that particular aspect of some men’s experience’.²⁷ To counter criticism against his play, Kramer offered, ‘I was against promiscuity long before *The Normal Heart*. [...] But proponents (even in this age of AIDS) of promiscuity – which is far different from sexual freedom, which I, of course, support – have made me their enemy’.²⁸ Hence, the battle for representation was not confined to a binary construction of the local government versus the people as portrayed by Kramer, but the play revealed a strong disconnect amongst writers in the New York community. There were those who believed that sexual representation of the gay community was essential in the wake of the epidemic, as opposed to those (like Kramer) who felt continued support for this form of representation was promoting the death of the gay community. If oppression, resistance and survival are integral components of post-AIDS queer drama, then *The Normal Heart* projects an immediate necessity to depict and define the gay experience

²⁷ Mark Turner, *Backward Glances: Cruising the Queer Streets of New York and London* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 2003), p.128, 129.

²⁸ Kramer, *Reports from the Holocaust*, p. 90

in the context of the epidemic, while informing the audience of the greater problem of homophobia within society.

Restoring sexual currency through memory in William Hoffman's *As Is*

William Hoffman's play, *As Is*, while acknowledging the grave impact of the AIDS epidemic on queer drama, appears to affirm the importance of capturing the memory of promiscuity in narrative. It portrays the story of Saul, a writer, runner and a person with AIDS (hereon referred to as PWA), and the physical and emotional degradation that occurs within his own body and his circle of friends, many of whom are also infected with the virus. The author presents memory as a way to pay homage to a less frightening era. In a scene where Saul visits another PWA friend at the hospital, Hoffman allows his character to push the boundaries of imagination, the romanticised memory of a friend in a pre-AIDS compromised state:

I visited Teddy today at St. Vincent's. It's very depressing... He's lying there in bed, out of it. He's been out of it since the time we saw him. He's not in any pain, snorting his imaginary cocaine, doing his poppers. Sometimes he's washing his mother's floor, sometimes he's having sex. You can see him there having sex right in front of you. He doesn't even know you're there.²⁹

²⁹William Hoffman, *As Is* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, Inc., 1985), p. 17

Teddy is no longer reduced to a decrepit state, but he is restored to exist in a healthy state, albeit only through memory. The disjointed prose is effective in capturing the desire of the narrator to reconstruct Teddy as he existed when he was a healthy man, partaking in the mundane tasks that made him human, in addition to the sexual experiences that also defined his life. Richard Dellamore succinctly defines the necessity of memory in AIDS narratives when he argued, 'AIDS has not destroyed the memory of gay existence, but it has made such destruction imaginable'.³⁰ Hence, I argue that passages such as the one above are essential in humanising those who have suffered through this epidemic.

The characters reminisce about their sexual desires in a pre-AIDS society:

SAUL God, I miss talking dirty.

RICH Talking dirty makes it feel like spring. (He is the superstud.) Suck my dick, faggot.

SAUL (Superstud.) Kiss my ass, cocksucker.

RICH Sit on it, punk.

SAUL Lick boot, fruit.

RICH God, how I used to love sleaze: the whining self-pity of a rainy Monday night in a leather bar in early spring; five o'clock in the morning in the Mineshaft, with the bathtubs full of men dying to get pissed on and whipped; a subway john full of horny high school students; Morocco—getting raped on a tombstone in Marrakech. God, how I miss it.

³⁰ Richard Dellamora, *Apocalyptic Overtures: Sexual Politics and the Sense of an Ending* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), p. 242.

[...]

SAUL And we did blotter acid. Remember acid before they put the speed in it? And we drank muscadet when we got thirsty.

RICH Remember Sunday afternoons blitzed on beer?

SAUL And suddenly it's Sunday night and you're getting fucked in the second-floor window of the Hotel Christopher and you're being cheered on by a mob of hundreds of men.

RICH And suddenly it's Friday a week later, and he's moved in, sleeping next to you, and you want him to go because you've met his brother Rod or Lance—³¹

This passage highlights an important signifier of the consensual nature of the sexual activities taking place. They reminisce about men 'dying to get pissed on and whipped' in addition to 'being cheered on by a mob of hundreds of men'. This recollection seizes the excitement of the era and confirms that it was in fact considered to be an essential aspect of gay life in New York City. It also reflects a critical element of memory in the formation of the early AIDS narratives; the positive recollections about promiscuity were representative of the era of hope and newfound freedom, but also of lamenting the death of sexuality that often accompanied a seropositive diagnosis. John Clum summarises this relationship between sex and death in this play: 'sexual promiscuity is not lamented as a probable cause for Rich's contraction of AIDS but is celebrated, its

³¹ Hoffman, p. 27

loss lamented. AIDS is lamented, but Rich learns to celebrate the life he has left. Sex is not merely equated with death, but is reintegrated into Rich and Saul's relationship'.³²

SAUL God, I used to love promiscuous sex.

RICH Not "promiscuous," Saul, nondirective, noncommitted, nonauthoritarian—

SAUL Free, wild, rampant—

RICH Hot, sweaty, steamy, smelly—

SAUL Juicy, funky, hunky—

RICH Sex.

SAUL Sex. God, I miss it.³³

Hoffman's dialogue is supportive in its commemoration of pre-AIDS promiscuous sex. However, he acknowledges that the landscape has changed and ends his play with the affirmation of love between gay men without the rejection of the journey it took for this freedom to reach fruition. Saul and Rich, two ex-lovers, make an affirmation of their union at the end of the play as Saul proclaims to the infected Rich, 'I'll take you as is'.³⁴

CONCLUSION

Much of the discourse on early AIDS narratives focussed on the representation and subsequent interpretation of promiscuity as it was depicted in early aesthetic writings.

Although gay writers were sharply divided about sexual representations of promiscuity,

³² John M. Clum, 'AIDS, Memory and Desire', *American Literature*, 62 (1990), 648-67 (p. 656).

³³ Hoffman, p. 28

³⁴ Hoffman, p. 58.

the devastatingly high mortality rates amongst gay men had irrefutably altered the landscape of sexual memory. As expressed in Dante's *Inferno*, 'there is no greater woe, than to remember happy times in misery'.³⁵ This sentiment appeared to embody much of the construction of memory in AIDS narratives. Even as public fears of the spread of HIV/AIDS within the uninfected population resulted in the demonising and ostracising of PWAs, these artists wielded their artistic leverage to restore a sense of empathy and humanity towards the sick and their caretakers by remembering the emotional, physical and spiritual degradation as a result of the disease.

The pastoral space provided by memory is the only feasible realm where one can travel to through time, to envision the era before AIDS in an attempt to find a joyous space. In giving credence to memory's ability to break one away from the depressive reality of illness, John Clum elucidates the importance of this space in post-AIDS queer literature: 'But what is re-membered in this barren land in which love has become death is not the neurasthenic dry couplings of Eliot's rainless land but a lost idyll which no water can restore'.³⁶ These profiled works represent a small spectrum of the full testimony of sex after AIDS. They employ a strategy of survivorhood; their continued existence amidst this epidemic affirms their need for activism, not only to remember the dead but to

³⁵ Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, Ed. and trans. Mark Musa. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995.)

³⁶ Clum, p. 648.

keep on imagining them. The threat was grave; so many gay men had died therefore literature and theatre served as a medium to preserve a culture or, at the very least, the memory of a dying culture. They offered a way to bring suffering out of the margins of society and into a public space. Grief and trauma become more approachable when constructed within the scope of memory . Essentially, these writers focused upon the memories of the good years to represent what sex used to be and project hope for the future.

While collective memory of gay narratives was internally defined as a battle of representation between promiscuity versus monogamy, the general public's understanding of the epidemic revealed a much more complicated fantasy of gay sex and fantasies of the anus as the harbinger of apocalyptic destruction. In his play, *The Normal Heart*, Larry Kramer insists that gay writers shift the narrative of sexual representation in the wake of the epidemic, affirming that 'a whole world that was sexual before AIDS came along and is going to be sexual after AIDS goes away'.³⁷ Following the emergence of AIDS and the perception of it as a novel, fatal and potentially widespread disease, responses were in large measure shaped by what Jane Lewis has described as 3-prong 'epidemic psychology': an epidemic of fear, and

³⁷ Pat Califia, 'The *Symphony Plays On*', *POZ* 1997, pp. 62-65,77 (p. 63).

epidemic of explanation and moralisation and epidemic of proposed action.³⁸ On the importance of action, Alexander Düttman notes, 'activism stresses that one must not lose any time in mourning, that too much time is lost that way. One does not have the time necessary for the work of mourning, because mourning... seems to destroy its won economy of time... It succumbs to its own overexertion'.³⁹ These narratives do not only mourn the death of individuals and communities; they memorialise the culture,, which seemed to be dying with them at that time

³⁸ Jane Lewis, 'Public Health Doctors and AIDS as a Public Health Issue', in *AIDS and Contemporary History*, ed. by Virginia Berridge and Philip Strong (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 37-54 (p. 38).

³⁹ Alexander Garcia Düttman, *At Odds with AIDS: Thinking and Talking About a Virus*, trans. by Peter Gilgen and Conrad Scott-Curtis (Palo Alto, Stanford University Press, 1993) p. 77.

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— Douglas Crimp, 'How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic', *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, 43 (Winter 1987), 237-271

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