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“Who Wants to Live Forever?” Andrew Holleran, Garth Greenwell, and The Gayest Decade That Never Ended

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James Baldwin’s remarkable second novel, *Giovanni’s Room* (1956) influenced all subsequent gay writing—not only in its themes, but also in its tone. Paying frequent homage to that book, Andrew Holleran’s *Dancer from the Dance* and other fiction of the Eighties taught gay men how to be gay, and the melancholic tone these novels created persisted for decades to come, exemplified most recently in Garth Greenwell’s *What Belongs to You* (2016). An unexpressed loss imbues the work of David Leavitt, Edmund White, Larry Kramer, Michael Cunningham, and Alan Hollinghurst, but the argument here is that more recent protagonists are, if anything, even more solitary than those in the bathhouses and discos of the Eighties.

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Boys will be boys

Life imitates art far more than art imitates life.
Oscar Wilde, *The Decay of Lying* (1891)

During the 1980s the arts frequently expressed fears and desires lurking below the surface of American society, and one of the memorable cultural artifacts stretching across the decade and into the early twentieth century is *Psycho*. The original film (1960) takes on a life of its own in the 80s: *Psycho II* (1983), *Psycho III* (1986), *Bates Motel* (1987) and *Psycho IV: The Beginning* (1990). One might have thought this was more than enough attention to that theme, but there was soon the remake of the original film (1998) and five seasons of the *Bates Motel* television series (2013-2017)! This fascination with mother-fixation is a bit odd, though in 1992 the Library of Congress deemed it culturally, historically, and/or aesthetically significant enough to be preserved in the National Film Registry. Apparently, this grotesque story somehow bespoke something deeply definitive of America in the eighties—perhaps a paranoid suspicion that men who are not stereotypically “masculine” are not to be trusted. Nonetheless, one should not conclude that Norman Bates, suffering from dissociative identity disorder, is meant to be perceived as a closeted homosexual: true enough, he had been taught that women are to be avoided at all costs, and the repressed mother’s voice quickly stifles any sexual desire the son might feel for an occasional woman visitor to the motel. Even the same-sex relations in which he finally engages in the last season of the television series is arguably his “mother” acting out Norman’s understanding of *her* sexual desires, rather than expressing her son’s. In any event, considering the fact that the original novel was published in 1960, that would have been a very long time for anyone to have postponed gratification. But the popularity of the films and television series suggests that they titillated Americans while subconsciously confirming their fear of anyone a little off center, a little queer.

Alternatively, American culture’s obsession with this character, especially during the 1980s, might be read – whether correctly or not – as popular culture’s symbol for the internalization of the lost loved object that Freud diagnoses as the pathology of melancholia. Norman just cannot let her go, and she thereupon takes over his personality. His own personality is quite unconscious that she is both irretrievable and unavoidably present. Anthony Perkins, who played the central character, was married and had two sons, but had a three-year relationship with Tab Hunter and died at the age of 60 from AIDS in 1992. He had met Hunter three years before taking the role in *Psycho*. Like the stereotype of a gay young man, Perkins apparently became very close to his mother and alienated from his father, who was often away from home. He told *People* magazine in 1983 that he had felt jealousy when the father would return, and experienced guilt at the age of five when his father suddenly died. I mention this rather striking mirroring not necessarily to suggest that Perkins sought out roles that helped him deal with his inner demons, but to raise the question of the extent to which fiction of the Eighties actually taught gay men how to be gay – and, if so, then what did it teach them? Vicariously, perhaps, these lascivious novels provided a vocabulary, a book of manners, as it were, a number of contrasting and even contradictory role models, as one might have found in a parent if that parent had encouraged the honest flowering of a child’s sexuality.

In the background, the recurrence of *Psycho* throughout the decade would seem to be like the tolling of a bell, warning of the dangers of repression. The novels, perhaps,

responded in kind, trying out alternatives to that horror waiting in one's psychic basement. Despite recent greater social acceptance and more forceful legal protections for lesbian and gay individuals in many parts of the world,¹ something very much like melancholy characterizes the complex spirit of the 1980s and is emblematic of the nostalgic memories inspired by that decade in gays and lesbians of a certain age.² Like most cases of nostalgia, this one requires selective memory, to be sure. Describing the year 1983, David Leavitt paints a picture that, as we shall see, becomes a trope in the novels of that generation of gay men: "You put on your Walkman. You think that tonight you might like to go dancing. Then the Pointer Sisters come on, and you realize that, like John Travolta tripping down the streets of Brooklyn in *Saturday Night Fever* [1977], you already are" (Leavitt 1985, 92). Yet, 1983 was the year that the world's first dedicated outpatient AIDS clinic, Ward 86, opened at San Francisco General Hospital. While far from a denial of the horror of the epidemic (arguably, in fact, the polar opposite of a denial), this frivolous description exemplifies a whistling past the expanding-and-apparently-unavoidable graveyard for gay men.

Without relying too heavily on it, I wish to reference Freud's contested distinction between mourning and melancholy as an entry point into this ever-present nostalgia in gay fiction of the period. Doing so will suggest that the endurance of what might otherwise be set aside as nostalgia becomes increasingly self-conscious after the eighties, and finally pales in comparison to something closer to melancholy that does not dissipate in gay writing, even into our own day. One reads Garth Greenwell's *What Belongs to You* (2016) and cannot avoid an experience of *déjà vu*, hearkening back to the tone, if not the plot, of Andrew Holleran's *Dancer from the Dance* (1978). Why this atmosphere in fiction has become more or less expected in gay fiction is what I would like to explore. The path of that exploration follows the question that one gay writer asked as recently as 2011, but that has echoed in the gay community for decades: "Are we, to some extent, in the enviable position of not being held accountable for becoming 'adults,' given our collective abolishment from the mainstream and all that comes with it, good and bad?"³ (Berusch 2011, n.p.). The Supreme Court case, *Obergefell v. Hodges*, 576 U.S. 644 (2015), may have been the death knell for that tired canard; only time will tell. In any case, whether the contemporary gay male continues to be seen as Peter Pan or as the comfortingly responsible (some would say, heteronormative) hero of *Father Knows Best*, the atmosphere of melancholy lingers and resonates in perplexing ways.

Leavitt (b. 1963) characterizes his generation as far more conservative and, frankly, fearful, than the baby boomers. He writes,

¹ Consider, for example, the Pope's endorsement of same-sex civil unions in 2020 (Horowitz 2020).

² Writing in 1991, Lillian Faderman notes that by the mid-1980s, "Many young lesbians who now entered the lesbian subcultures not only took for granted their feminist rights, but also made light of the high seriousness associated with being a politically correct lesbian-feminist. [...] The new young lesbians created images such as that of the 'glamour dyke' or 'lipstick lesbian,' and their frequently glamorous self-presentation may have been responsible for the beginning of a new 'lesbian chic' that seems to be making bisexuality as provocative in some sophisticated circles as it had been in the 1920s. Through those images, lesbianism could once again be associated with a kind of super-sexy rebelliousness and allure. As in the 1920s, female entertainers by the end of the 80s began to tantalize their audiences with hints of bisexuality" (Faderman 1991, 272-73).

³ Unfortunately, the answer he offers to his own question seems predictable and trite: "To succumb to that can of beer, scratch our bellies, sitting on the couch, being loud as hell, watching the game as it cuts to a commercial with a bunch of hot babes prancing their 'unmentionables'? My cornucopia-of-fruit headdress doesn't think so. We are just too fabulous for that."

Fifteen years ago you weren't supposed to trust anyone over thirty. For people in my generation, the goal seems to be to get to thirty as fast as possible, and stay there. Starting out, we are eager, above all else, to be finished. If we are truly a generation without character, as is often claimed, it is because we have seen what has happened to generations with character. If we are without passion or affect, it is because we have decided that passion and affect are simply not worth the trouble. If we stand crouched in the shadows of a history in which we refuse to take part, it is because that's exactly where we've chosen to stand. (Leavitt 1985, 94)

Leavitt describes a generation without “character”, without passion, and more focused on their careers than on their place in “history”. One might wonder how many from his generation actually chose the disengagement he portrays (and apparently embraces). Whether a consciously chosen vocational plan or an unconscious herd-like characteristic, Leavitt’s description rings true for those who remember the Eighties as a decade of distraction from the political awareness and commitment of the Sixties and Seventies. For Leavitt, “If the Sixties was an age of naïve hope, then the Eighties is an age of ironic hopelessness” (Leavitt 1985, 93).

This reaction to the often-frustrated idealism of the Sixties was more pervasive than merely focused in the gay community of the 1980s, as Neil Postman points out in the analysis he published in the same year as Leavitt’s essay, 1985. Postman argues that many had feared that the year 1984 would be an Orwellian collapse of personal freedom. When the year came and went, there was a sigh of relief, but Postman suggests that the fear that Orwell’s book, published in 1949, instilled temporarily displaced the warnings of an earlier author: “What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What [Aldous] Huxley [in *Brave New World*, published in 1932] feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one” (Postman 1985, vii) What Postman described as amusing-ourselves-to-death may have been resented by baby boomers as a superficial description, but it would not be described by Leavitt’s cohort as an insult; quite the contrary: his generation’s battle cry was “we work hard, then we play hard” (see Aarssen and Crimi 2016). Thus, if what is in retrospect “missing” in the Eighties – a sense of values beyond one’s narrow self-interest, for example – this is clearly an *unacknowledged* loss. Generations on either side of Leavitt’s might suggest that this partially explains the melancholy pervading much of the decade and focused most notably among homosexual men who, if Freud is to be believed, were already hard-wired for melancholy. If one looks at the gay literature from that period, one finds evidence that this indeed was the case. But the desperately compensatory “joy” of the evening enclaves comes with a price, encapsulated by Freud’s famous phrase: “In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself” (Freud 1957, 246). Those who came of age in the Sixties and Seventies had plenty to mourn; those of the Eighties, before the “cocktail” that transformed HIV positivity to a chronic condition rather than a death sentence, had far more to mourn but sometimes, after emotional exhaustion, tried to avoid the mourning, and consequently became melancholic.

And fearful. Leavitt writes elsewhere in his article that “Rather than move, we burrow. We are interested in stability, neatness, entrenchment. We want to stay in one place and stay in one piece, establish careers, establish credit” (Leavitt 1985, 88). In his own case, he describes moving to New York as a young man to establish some sort of career. He recalls his job interview with the manager of the Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop, and Leavitt uses the event to illustrate how a hollowing out of political ideals

separates his generation from the one before. When asked by the manager to “tell him about my ‘movement experience’” (i.e., his political activism), he is flummoxed. “For a few seconds I just blanked out. I thought he was talking about dance” (Leavitt 1985, 88). Leavitt comically and without shame recalls this younger self as someone in an unfamiliar hermeneutical context like a fish out of water, thinking that an interviewer at a bookstore might be inquiring about the job candidate’s dance history while Leavitt wonders what category of clientele this bookstore typically served (choreographers, perhaps? Olympic gymnastics teams – ah, that would make showing up for work much easier!). Some readers might conclude that the young Leavitt, by including this memory (unless it was manufactured), wished (or wishes) to announce his liberation from the grand causes that plagued his parents’ generation. Not surprisingly, he goes on to describe his youth as something akin to solipsistic: “Sometimes I feel,” he writes, “as if I live in a room with mirrored walls, imagining that the tiny space I occupy is in fact endless, and constitutes a real world” (Leavitt 1985, 88). The “as if” is important, one supposes, implying that Leavitt at some level recognizes that his meagre self-reflecting world is, at best, a simulacrum of the world of the real adults (who happen to be heterosexual?). The jouissance that arises from insulating oneself with a Walkman from the world of others foregrounds the pain at the heart of this nostalgia – something to do with securing a solitary life in anticipation of abandonment by those one might have loved, including, perhaps, one’s imagined (if ghettoized) *community* of the alienated (see Dimitriadis 2017). It is as if Leavitt recognizes a chasm opening before him, and implicitly recommends that like-minded readers *dance* on the edge of that precipice even as (and because) their loved ones are falling in.

Have You Been a Very Very Bad Boy?

For Freud, “all the traits of mourning – deep pain, disinterest in the world, an inability to love, and inertia – also are traits of melancholy, but to this list Freud adds very low self-esteem, which expresses itself in self-hate to the point of a delusional expectation of punishment. It is this ‘disturbance of self-regard’ that is the defining trait of melancholy and makes all the difference” (Sigurdson 2017, 404). Gay literature has always lived with death and abjection, but can it be said to demonstrate “a delusional expectation of punishment” – and what forms of “punishment” would authors incorporate into their stories? As Monica Pearl puts it, the “death of innocence, death of heterosexual identity, death of parental/adult authority, death of the natural order – even a feeling that a child turned gay might just as well be dead” (Pearl 2013, 8) – all of these are meted out not only by life itself, but by novelists chronicling the gay community of the Eighties, as punishments for crimes one did not know one was committing, until it was too late to do anything about it, even if one had been trying very, very hard to keep that closet door tightly closed. One might surmise that such abjection contextualizes the stereotypical gay fascination with operatic deaths and abandonment, the frailty of commitment, the obsession with distraction and with camp. “There is a legacy of gay literature, both before AIDS and since,” Pearl writes, “in which a gay character dies unnaturally or prematurely” (Pearl 2013, 9). In most of the literature there is a foreboding and loss of all sorts, including loss of family, and this is something of a two-edged sword: “While coming out stories are in some significant ways about the triumph of a gay identity over the disapproval of family, society, and friends, they are still very much about the yearning for and sacrifice of those entities” (Pearl 2013, 9).

The creation of an alternate community, therefore, is necessitated by exile from other communities. In Edmund White's coming-out stories, for example, "The grief of the coming out novels is tied to a longing that even before it can be defined is best articulated as a kind of nostalgia" (Pearl 2013, 10). White's *A Boy's Own Story* (1982), James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (amazingly, 1956), David Leavitt's *The Lost Language of Cranes* (1986) chart "the lonely existence of a gay adolescent who knows of no other gay men, no community of men like himself" (Pearl 2013, 10). There is, therefore, "a pre-existing mourning, as it were, among gay men before the advent of AIDS" (Pearl 2013, 10). Death or renunciation typify the endings of such novels, as in *Giovanni's Room* ("What kind of life can two men have together, anyway?", Baldwin's troubled protagonist ponders [1956, 208]). Rather than self-loathing, such despair over the impossibility of living a truly "normal" life in an accepting community seems to leave only two uncomfortable options: bury one's actualized self beneath layers of artifice, or live defiantly in a leper colony.

Judith Butler attributes "gay melancholy" to "the foreclosed status of homosexual love as that which 'never was' and, therefore, 'never was lost'" (Butler 1995, 165). Her nuanced essay goes on to develop the implications this has for gender formation and expectations, but that is beyond the scope of the present article. Paraphrasing theories Freud expressed in "Mourning and Melancholy," Butler writes that "if, in melancholia, a loss is refused, it is not for that reason abolished. [...] If the object can no longer exist in the external world, it will then exist internally; and that internalization will also be a way to disavow that loss, to keep it at bay, to stay or postpone the recognition and suffering of loss" (Butler 1995, 167). She goes on to argue: "When certain kinds of losses are compelled by a set of culturally prevalent prohibitions, then we may well expect a culturally prevalent form of melancholia, one that signals the internalization of the ungrieved and ungrievable homosexual cathexis" (Butler 1995, 171). Thus, "where melancholy is the refusal of grief, it is also always the incorporation of loss, the miming of the death it cannot mourn" (Butler 1995, 174). Or, as Timothy Barr puts it, "In melancholia what is lost is unclear to observers and opaque to the patient: it is unconscious" (2019, 318). For Freud, it is an unacknowledged and thus powerful driving force in the lives of gays who, as Monica Pearl argues, have been "excluded from the normative fictional (realist) narratives of love, marriage, procreation, and death" (Pearl 2013, 19).

But Pearl goes on to argue that "to ascribe a strict Freudian definition of melancholia to a gay or queer identity is to make assumptions about the self-destructiveness or inherent masochism of a gay identity that [she does] not endorse" (Pearl 2013, 16) – nor do I. Still, as the AIDS crisis takes hold in the Eighties, "finally gay men are included in the universal theme of degeneration and death" (Pearl 2013, 19). This very odd-seeming invitation to the larger human family (through death) is a chimera: mourning cannot bring gays *back* to "normal", since they were never there.

The normative working through of loss requires that the ego decide not to share in the fate of the lost object and to redirect its attachments to another object. [...] This might be one significant point that for gay men in the time of AIDS marks the mourning ego as melancholic, in that there is often no possibility of deciding not to share in the fate of the lost object when one is not only potentially on the same downward mortal course, but the loss that is being worked through is bound to happen again and again. [...] The loss then is always already happening. [...] The loss becomes impossible to name, *because it is not only the loss of a particular individual*

but of an identity that cannot be fixed while the losses are ongoing. (Pearl 2013, 17-8; emphasis added)

How, then, does this show itself in the novels of that decade?

We're Not in Kansas Anymore

Responses to the melancholy were varied. Dance, which clearly represented for David Leavitt a temporary reprieve from daily anxiety, caught the fancy of other writers from the decade, for whom it served as a fitting metaphor for a way of life. Andrew Holleran draws his title (*Dancer from the Dance*, 1978) from Yeats's poem, "Among School Children" (1933) which asks: "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" If the dancer is not dancing, there is no dancer. Holleran's generation identifies with movement, existential self-creation, edging toward ecstasy. In the novel that results, Holleran demonstrates that only "in the life", as it were, do his characters fully exist—and shows in this era-defining book that the life his characters prefer to the 'real' world around them is one that is completely artificial, far from the 'movement experience' of his elders (and bookstore owners). Holleran's characters count down the daylight hours in order to reach a life that is nocturnal, as alienated from the common man as would be that of vampires, and perhaps as threatening to those who dominate the daylight hours. Michael Cunningham describes *Dancer from the Dance* as "the first gay novel *everybody* read" (Cunningham 2018, n.p.). Recognizing, perhaps, that his topic might otherwise be "too" gay for a mass audience, Holleran crafts the plot as a seduction, a metaphorical dance between a handsome Midwesterner (Malone) who moves from his buttoned-down life to New York City and the tutelage of Sutherland, who introduces him to a series of transgressive excitations – the clubs, the bathhouses, etc., and like Malone the reader is happy to have such a knowledgeable Virgil as subterranean guide. For the world he portrays has its hellish side, often hidden away in meatpacking districts in unmarked buildings in unlikely parts of town. And not all the physical danger (let alone the psychological) is pretense.

Published in the same year (1978) were Edmund White's *Nocturnes for the King of Naples* and Larry Kramer's *Faggots*. Kramer's narrator revels in the orgiastic escapes created in the wee hours in Manhattan:

This is one massive cake of solid body, thousands, Hot Men, radiating enough heat to defrost Arctic wastes and I am being pulled into it and I am dancing and dancing, oh we are so many bodies, plowing my way through bodies, bashing and twisting and poppers passed like party favors and seven men now hold me and we swing and sway and sweat becoming One!, and I am dancing with strangers and dancing with friends and we are plucking each other from this vastness and I am a madman... (Kramer 1978, 352)

Both White's and Kramer's are tales of loss, but the tone in each is distinct. White's writing is similar to Holleran's in its elegiac yearning for the unreachable, the perfect love that is always already slipping from one's grasp. Kramer's, while possibly romantic in its motivation is ultimately harshly acerbic in its expression (some would say, self-hating): *Faggots* is a jeremiad addressed to gays with such urgent clarity (obviously a call to action) that its prosaic, didactic writing was dismissed by most critics as a screed. On the verge of the AIDS crisis, and therefore almost prescient in its attack on multiple sex partners and unprotected sexual activity, Kramer's target in the novel is actually the

retrieval of love in a community that had, in his view, given up and settled for promiscuity:

At this point tears turn to anger. Anger finally arrives. How dare we have treated ourselves and each other so badly? Anger. For love unrealized. For settling for so little. For humiliation and its pleasure. For foolishness revealed. For having loved half a person. And therefore having hoped only half fully. [...] For the lack of courage to be faithful. To self and love. [...] And anger for having to give you up. [...] One of these days we must stop shitting on each other. And go out into the world and try to live with a bit of pride. [...] Now it's time to just *be*. [...] I'm not gay. I'm not a fairy. I'm not a fruit. I'm not queer. A little crazy maybe. And I'm not a faggot. I'm a homosexual Man. I'm Me. (Kramer 1978, 359-61)

Each man his own creation, as in the Harlem vogue dance battles of the Eighties (Hawley 2005) – not some faceless member of a self-destructive monolith. For that chastisement Kramer was ostracized by members of the community he described – the book was banned by the only gay bookstore in Manhattan (Shilts 2007, 26), the same store where Leavitt sought employment. His protagonist (unlike Malone and Sutherland in *Dancer from the Dance*), exhausted by encounters with BDSM, group sex, and glory holes, yearns for something less *queer*:

I'm tired of using my body as a faceless thing to lure another faceless thing, I want to love a Person!, I want to go out and live in that world with that Person, a Person who loves me, we shouldn't *have* to be faithful, we should *want* to be faithful, love grows, sex gets better, if you don't drain all your fucking energy off somewhere else [...]. I've lived all over the world and I haven't seen more than half a dozen couples who have what I want. (Kramer 1978, 315-16)

He calls for others to seek out such happy monogamous couples, rare though they may be, “before you fuck yourself to death” (Kramer 1978, 316). White and Kramer would go on to help found the Gay Men's Health Crisis in 1981, and through that organization the anger and frustration in *Faggots* would be directed ever more forcefully at the U.S. government's silence on the burgeoning health crisis in the gay community. The quixotic nature of his quest suggests Kramer's deep-seated melancholy caused by the cascading deaths of increasing numbers of his acquaintances.

The politics of the heteronormative world unfortunately being what it was (and is), Holleran's and Kramer's novels, and, to a lesser extent, White's *Nocturnes for the King of Naples*, perhaps because they gained enough notoriety that they were read by a broader audience than the gay audience they first addressed – set in stone a particular reading of “the gay” experience of the late 1970s, as if there were only one. That impression was to continue during the club culture in the 1980s and the rave scene in the 1990s. Barbara Harrison, reviewing *Faggots*, pushed back against that perception. She was “disgusted” by Kramer's novel, and stipulated that she did not believe it represented the gay community: “[Kramer] is in fact writing about a peculiarly ugly, vicious, perverse, depraved, sado-masochistic subculture in which love does not exist – a subculture that homosexuals have been at pains to say is not representative of homosexual life. If I believed for a moment that it were, I might be inclined to join forces with [Anita] Bryant” (Harrison 1978, n.p.). Her fastidious response cannot blot out the reality of the subculture that these novels portrayed, though, and many gays (as the nostalgia suggests) did not find it “peculiarly ugly.” It was like discovering masturbation during adolescence – and making that discovery anew every night.

Certainly, for many gays outside the urban centers during the Eighties living quietly in Iowa or Oregon or North Carolina, the “disgusting” world of the novels was sometimes terrifying, and therefore titillating – if for no other reason than for its potential to upset the applecart in their own closeted lives in one way or another. Indeed, another (and arguably the *dominant*) way of being “gay” during this decade, certainly spanning the seventies and into the second decade of the twenty-first century, was the now well-recognized cloaking technique described memorably by Andrew Tobias. The goal of his every social decision was to appear to be “the best little boy in the world” (Tobias 1973) – with the emphasis being on “little boy” – an over-achieving and completely inoffensive constructive member of (heteronormative) society. In 2013 the endurance of this “counter” infantilization (the mirror image of the “bad boy” of the Manhattan demimonde) was demonstrated by sociologists John Pachankis and Mark Hatzenbuehler (and see Adam Chandler’s personal reflections, also from 2013). In this scenario (and one, admittedly, also played out during the day by some of those in the clubs late at night) the closeted gay would excel in academics, in generosity, in winning elections to class offices, in entering seminaries, in getting married to unsuspecting women, in raising children who may have unspoken questions – consider Alison Bechdel’s 2006 *Fun Home*,⁴ in leading lives of quiet desperation and, to believe the portrayal of them in the literature of the time, in becoming potential suicides.

The Haze of Glitter

Reflecting on the same club scenes from the appreciative angle shared by so many novelists from the eighties, Andrew Holleran’s protagonist longingly describes this atemporal utopia to which some few have been granted admission:

[I]n winter, in those rooms in the city, with the music and the men, everything was trapped, and nature being banished, everyone was reduced to an ecstatic gloom. How serious it was, how dark, how deep – how aching, how desperate. We lived on certain chords in a song, and the proximity of another individual dancing beside you, taking communion from the same hand, soaked with sweat, stroked by the same tambourines... “What do we all have in common in this group?” I once asked a friend seriously, when it occurred to me how slender, how immaterial, how ephemeral the bond was that joined us; and he responded, “We all have lips.” (Holleran 1978, 112;114)

Similarly for Leavitt’s generation, the clubs and what came with them offered a quick and temporary release from the drive to find success and stability:

I don’t remember ever feeling as much joy as I did that year, when, on any Saturday night, on a crowded dance floor I’d hear my favorite song begin. It was as if my body itself had become an instrument, pulled and plucked and wrenched by the music, thrown beyond itself. This was no love-in of the Sixties, no drug-hazed ritual of communion. We were dancing with ourselves. Someone joked that each of us could have had on his own individual Walkman. (Leavitt 1985, 90)

⁴ Looking back on the Eighties, one is struck by the comparative invisibility of lesbians – where are the bad girls of the female demimonde, or the best little girls of the daylight? This aporia is remarkable, but a parallel universe with similar players is hinted at by Christa Winsloe’s 1930 play *Gestern und Heute*, filmed as *Mädchen in Uniform* (1931 and remade in 1958) and Ira Levin’s novel *The Stepford Wives* (1972; filmed in 1975 and remade in 2004).

This portrait of an individual body “thrown beyond itself” notably embraces isolation in the midst of a herd, self-pleasuring rather than intimate with any real person on the dance floor – but “joy,” nonetheless. And so, too, in their lives when the sun comes up: Leavitt describes his cohort as “determined to make sure everyone knows that what we say might not be what we mean” (1985, 93). The fear of being taken seriously, of being held accountable for one’s ideas or commitments or identity, is palpable, something of a Peter Pan complex of never wanting to grow up – I can say and do whatever I like, with no consequences; no one takes me seriously, and let’s just keep it that way. The purpose of conversation is as much to conceal as it is to reveal; it is a performance, a self-creation. Tonight, I will be a leather master; tomorrow, an ingénue. If I cannot be a husband or a father, I will be an errant boy with secrets, private languages, coded handkerchiefs, special toilet stalls, naughty sections of public parks, games like cowboys and Indians – forever. Just try and stop me; I will slip from your grasp.

Even if Holleran’s and Kramer’s portrayals are very narrowly specific to a particular city, and to certain venues in that city, and to certain hours of the day, they were highly influential in contextualizing a condemnation of homosexuality in America in the early 1980s and thereby reinscribing the isolation that defined characters like Malone, fresh from the farm (though, in his case, that “farm” was a Midwestern law firm). Yet it must again be emphasized that the world these novelists described was *not* a home actually recognized by many gays throughout the country. Outside the clubbing fraternity, “being gay in the 80s meant being isolated from an identity” (Jimenez-Lindmeier 2017, 1) because that identity was not explicitly spoken, or was framed by heterosexuals who condemned the whole “lifestyle”, or was created by those who embraced the masculinity divinized by Tom of Finland (i.e., Touko Valio Laaksonen). For many such readers, the world of Holleran’s novel, while fascinating, was further isolating; the alienation and counter-cultural aggressiveness of its denizens threatened many homosexuals as much as it threatened the curious reading public that was happy to be entertained by what appeared to many to be a bunch of oddball loners (embodied and caricatured by the Village People, active from 1977-1985). Looming just three years after these books’ publication, the first reports of a “gay plague” slammed the closet door loudly and forcefully for many of those readers who had already memorized, with self-concern, “the stereotypes of who is gay and what that meant” (Jimenez-Lindmeier 2017, 3). For some, the desire to keep the door tightly shut stemmed from fear of the social stigma attached to AIDS, homosexuals, and drug addiction, and the collation of the three.

Holleran’s “ecstatic gloom” seems inescapably masochistic, apocalyptic, operatic. He ends the novel with this haunting line: “Go out dancing tonight, my dear, and go home with someone, and if the love doesn’t last beyond the morning, then know I love you” (Holleran 1978, 250). If this is the love Larry Kramer seeks, one would be surprised. Holleran’s characters appear to be a loose fraternity offering limited but crucial support; if one is lucky, some member will step forward at just the right moment and help one lurch back from complete oblivion, complete erasure, a drug overdose, despair. But if no one does, what did it matter, anyway? One always was, and will always remain, alone. One’s best days are always behind one. The wrinkles are relentless.

Whether one is gay or straight, therefore, Holleran’s hauntingly nostalgic novel works as a gateway to the decade of the 1980s, which *The Guardian* describes as “a perfect storm of male queerness” (O’Flynn 2018), an era of disco queens and music from Sylvester, Bronski Beat, et al. – a seductive demimonde that implies a queer critique of the heteronormative masses who take over with the rising sun; a counter-culture that

seemed hyper-cool to sophisticates who knocked tentatively at its doors. If “the figure of the gay male in pop has historically been fragmented, exploited for its aesthetics, cloaked in straightness, buried underground” (O’Flynn 2018, n.p.), the Eighties were a cultural Petri dish for something new, initially transgressive, and finally dominant. The drug-enhanced club world was a created alternative reality, an increasingly fragile escape into a queer alternative world. The politics practiced in the clubs and bathhouses, often ruthless and complex (and portrayed in the British television series, *Queer as Folk* (UK, 1999; U.S., 2000-2005), was nonetheless irrelevant to the grander machinations of the movers and shakers outside its closed circle, in straight America, in Washington DC and on Wall Street. The decade began with “I’m Coming Out” (1980) and “It’s Raining Men” (1982) – with heteronormative lyrics (“for the first time in history [...] each and every woman can find the perfect man”) but an accompanying video that was markedly gay. The decade continued with Frankie Goes to Hollywood’s “Relax” (1983) with lyrics explicit enough (leading listeners to wonder, can they really be singing about delayed gratification in masturbation?) that some stations refused to play it. Other lyrics were comparatively innocent: “I Want to Break Free” (1984), “You Spin Me Round” (1984), “Smalltown Boy” (1984), “True Colors” (1986), and “I Wanna Dance with Somebody” (1987). Concluding the decade were tunes like George Michaels’s “Freedom” (1990) and Madonna’s “Vogue” (1990). Queen rode high in the first half of the decade, reaching their acme in an iconic performance at Live AID in 1985 (Freddie Mercury, their lead singer, died of AIDS in 1991). The lyrics of Queen’s 1986 hit, “Who Wants to Live Forever,” embody the sadness of those who had loved and lost, and the defiance of those rejected by society who look to the immediate moment as the closest thing they will ever get to eternity – perhaps another form of “ecstatic gloom.” In an earlier decade, it might have served as a duet for Tony and Maria in *West Side Story*:

There’s no time for us
 There’s no place for us
 What is this thing that builds our dreams
 Yet slips away from us?
 Who wants to live forever?

There have always been lyrics that elaborate upon the interlocking *Liebestod* and the “carpe diem” themes – make the most of the moment, since love and life are transient. But there is a certain poignancy when such words are sung by someone literally dying as his audience listens. In many cases, these deaths offered confirmation of commonly-held assumptions about particular singers, et al. In other cases, it involved a rude awakening of the audience, a sad but efficient vehicle to demonstrate the extent of homosexual activity in society at a particularly cursed time of plague – a terrifying illness that was oddly targeted against those that heteronormative society wished to get rid of, anyway. Still, if Freddie Mercury can ask “what is this thing that builds our dreams / Yet slips away from us?”, Larry Kramer might ask *why* it is “slipping away”— does it have to do with heteronormativity’s proscriptions against normalizing the queer, or does it arise and persist because the gay icons who sing such melancholy (and perhaps self-pitying) lyrics might actually *prefer* the one-night-stand over the boredom of the same person for the rest of one’s life, even if that life still had to be lived in the closet. For all his hysterical schoolmarm persona, Kramer was actually commanding his community to embrace its agency and resist the passive acquiescence in the face of death that the demimonde seemed to encourage. From within his own community, he had to face the scorn of those who despised the artificial limits of monogamy, proclaiming that

one should embrace the inability to legally marry so that polyamory could be established as a real alternative in society. As Brian O'Flynn writes,

The queer male figure in 80s pop was largely indistinct, visible only through the slats of half-open closet doors. "Understanding 1980s pop music in relation to sexuality requires a high tolerance for cognitive dissonance," says LGBTQ historian Dr. Aaron Lecklike of the University of Massachusetts Boston. Some queer men were in, some were out and some straight men revelled in what is now recognised as a queer aesthetic – the haze of glitter blurred everything. The new romantic look was androgynous and flamboyant, but these signifiers didn't instantly register as queer. As critic Alfred Soto wrote of George Michael: "Fine with queerness so long as the artists didn't ask or tell, the 1980s were the last time pop stars could wear fingerless kitchen gloves without audiences assuming they were gay." (O'Flynn 2018, n.p.)

That naiveté or willful blindness was changing in the Eighties, and how could it be otherwise. Again, as Monica Pearl writes, "The growth of gay and lesbian writing and publishing – a veritable boom in the 1980s – coincided with the AIDS crisis" (Pearl 2013, 6). This offers an explanation of that "ecstatic gloom" Holleran's protagonist describes. As Pearl notes, "it was the grief, mourning, and letting go, as found in the literature, primarily after Stonewall and before AIDS, that constituted the gay community as such" (Pearl 2013, 8). Ironically, the very foundations that structure that ever-more-visible community (and, thus, are a cause for celebration) arise from the crisis that is killing off that community: "it is AIDS that allows this pre-existing, and mostly vague and inarticulate, sadness around unacceptance and loss of family bonds to be at last articulated" (Pearl 2013, 10) – as if a family is meeting its members for the first time as it gathers at a funeral home, recognizing a commonality of emotional loss and trauma among those present, never before having fully recognized and accepted (let alone proclaimed) membership in that rapidly diminishing family.

"He appeared in dreams from which I woke more excited than I was by anything in my waking life." (Greenwell 2016, 106)

The evolution from that decade to our own is a tale of gradual normalization of "non-normative" sexuality, but the melancholic aura persists in its representation. Moving forward from the Eighties, the symbolic importance of the decade was increasingly recognized by writers looking back on what had been lost. The AIDS crisis had pushed open the closet doors and become a force for actual liberation well beyond the cultural brew fermenting in the subterranean realm *tard dans la nuit*. That change is expressed memorably in 1990 by Queer Nation's battle cries: "we're here, we're queer. Get used to it!" and "Out of the Closets and into the Streets," expressing the rebirth of the politics Leavitt dismissed but embraced by the likes of Larry Kramer. The themes of transgressive self-expression of the decade morphed slowly into the mournful tones of k.d. lang's "Constant Craving" (1992) and Melissa Etheridge's "Come to My Window" (1993). As successful anti-retroviral drugs became more broadly available, Janet Jackson dedicates "Together Again" (1997) to those she's lost to AIDS, and Cher celebrates new beginnings in "Believe" (1998) – with lyrics that were no longer quite specifically heterosexual and accompanied with a video that has strong lesbian undertones. Indeed, the queering of western society found increasing acceptance among the generation that danced to these seemingly transgressive lyrics, as if they were yearning for some tentative entry into "the dance" heretofore forbidden to them.

For others, just having fun took on a Bacchic heady mix of seizing what little of life might still be on offer, quickly, while there was still fun to be had. Unconsciously, many sensed that the former transgressive ghettoized world had already died, but no one wanted to tell the victim. Commodification was moving in to fill the unexpressed bereavement, offering material goods to compensate for emotional loss, courting wealthy gays as potential customers and donors to this or that cause. The pornography industry took on special importance, providing a mechanism for safe sex while foregrounding the alienation and anonymity that characterized the club scene. As one sometime porn actor observed,

Porn was no longer a chronicle of the sexual activity of the men who made it, and consumed it – instead, the films and magazines quickly became a surrogate for skin-on-skin experience. The ‘California Blond’ aesthetic popularized by such filmmakers as William Higgins and Chuck Holmes of Falcon Studios took on new dimensions. The Kurt Marshalls and Kip Nolls, the Leo Fords and Jack Wranglers, were more than objects of desire – they became superheroes. Their onscreen lives of erotic abandon were untainted by anxiety and disease. (Scuglia 2015, 114-15)

The sadness of that description of bygone porn stars as heroes of the Seventies and Eighties offers an important distillation for subsequent writers of the persistent theme of melancholy in gay romance.

Alan Hollinghurst’s *The Line of Beauty* (2004) is divided into three sections, set in 1983, 1986 and 1987, and looks back at the hypocrisy and alienation of the closet, paralleling it with class distinctions in British society. As with other novels mentioned here, *The Line of Beauty* “does not present something that is to come but distinctly ‘something that was over’ that has not been, but needs to be grieved” (Yekani 2012, 221). Since gay love was not accepted by society in general, the loss of gay lovers is not seen or mourned. This, coupled to the loss of specific sites of transgressive sexual expression, means that “melancholy is transferred to specific sites that are tied to the performativity of identity. Hollinghurst constructs and aestheticizes these places as belonging to a gay culture of the 1980s that is no more” (222). With the death of his upper class lover in that novel, Nick loses his borrowed social status along with his lover – suggestive of the always-tenuous nature of the transgressive freedoms allowed gays in the Eighties by a heteronormative world that chooses to avert its eyes – until it chooses not to.

Decades after the Eighties, the sense of desperate nostalgia continues in those parts of the world that still vigorously maintain The Closet, demonstrated in Tatiana Vinogradova’s 2013 series of portraits focused on the life of gay people in Russia. It is a visual tale of loneliness and uncertainty about the future for those living under governmental disdain and threat. In 2020, the reactionary Andrzej Duda was reelected to another five-year term as president of Poland, pledging to oppose same-sex marriage and adoption, and to forbid teaching about LGBTQ issues in schools. In a similar vein, Juliet Jacques writes of the sometimes surprising yearning for the gay male subculture that has passed, documenting the disappearance of many of London’s LGBTQ+ venues – some shabby or outré or unsanitary, but heavy with the memory of jouissance that Holleran’s and Hollinghurst’s novels document (Dimitriadis 2017).

Representing the acme of the melancholy addressed in this essay and demonstrating its persistence well into the twenty-first century is Garth Greenwell’s *What Belongs to You*. Named one of the best books of 2016 by over 50 publications, it ends with these words: “I stood there for some time, gazing at the corner from which he had vanished.

Then I stepped inside, and sitting where he had been just a moment before beside me, I lowered my face into my hands” (Greenwell 2016, 191). Holleran’s conclusion in *Dancer from the Dance*, referenced above, echoes here and throughout this later novel, as if Greenwell is paying homage to his forebears. Greenwell recreates the earlier novel’s sense of impending doom, though he chooses to do so by moving the venue to Sofia, Bulgaria, and stripping away the glitz and glamor of New York’s nightlife while retaining the sleaze of the public restrooms and “forbidden” sex of yesteryear, now more or less erased from the United States. Greenwell’s plot focuses on a visiting American poet who becomes involved with Mitko, a hustler. In his glowing review of the novel for *The New York Times*, Aaron Hamburger writes that the book demonstrates “how a traditional upbringing conditions a sweet, innocent kid to link desire with humiliation and hiding, and then how that kid transforms into a man addicted to that connection” (Hamburger 2016, n.p.). That clever analysis of a Malone-redux might go a long way towards explaining the recurring scenes of loneliness and self-destruction of much of the gay writing focused on the Eighties – Hamburger might as easily have been writing a review of Holleran or Kramer, but he was writing about a novel described, as we have seen, as among the very best of 2016.

The melancholic sensitivities in Holleran’s and Greenwell’s books are strong – the sense of loss for something that was always ephemeral – starting, in many cases, with a father’s unconditioned love, and moving on to society’s shunning of any adult who chooses an honest expression of sexuality. But by 2016 the protagonist is, if anything, even more solitary than Holleran’s, Kramer’s, or Leavitt’s. With the move to Bulgaria as a site for gay sexual expression, Greenwell can produce a protagonist who has no convincing identity issues (beyond the pro forma need for approval from the absent father) but who embodies all the isolation of the most alienated of gays from earlier decades, devoting most of his erotic energy to the pursuit of a hopeless and always already inaccessible love object (a hustler in a public toilet), one that is doomed to be lost before it has been attained. His life as a teacher is barely dealt with; in effect, Greenwell has recreated a gay protagonist from the Eighties, as if the character had not changed even if American society had (and, thus, the move to a city with which none of his readers would likely be familiar – for the purposes of this author, Sofia might as well be a dark street in late-night Manhattan).

Recall that, for Freud,

soon enough, the mourner, who is reacting in a non-pathological manner, recognizes and responds to the *call of reality*, to let go of the lost-loved object and liberate libidinal desire. This is the point of divergence with the melancholic who remains sunken in his loss, unable to acknowledge and accept to need to cleave and in a self-destructive loyalty to the lost object, internalizes it into his ego” (Ferber 2011, 1).⁵

Hamburger finds the last section of the novel “mysterious,” and the book’s title a “burden,” “vague and unmemorable” (Hamburger 2016, n.p.). Perhaps he missed the narrator’s explanation for both, as Greenwell’s narrator reluctantly tries to cut his ties with Mitko: “I had to end it, I knew, I had to give up the pleasure of him, not just the obvious pleasure but the pleasure of being kind, of what I had taken for kindness and now feared was something else” (Greenwell 2016, 152). His growing recognition of what

⁵ Ferber discusses questions that have been posed to Freud’s theory since its publication, including those of Tammy Clewell (2004), Walter Benjamin (1977), Giorgio Agamben (1993), and others.

did *not* belong to him seems a new way to confront melancholy – possibly even turning it into mourning, but never fully recovering, never fully awakening from the dream.⁶ His persistent recognition of “what Mitko might have been” (169) informs his memory of a train trip he took with his mother, of how he had stopped returning her calls “which grew increasingly frantic until they fell away” (168), and of how he had seen a young boy on the train about whom he thought he might write a poem – “which would be both true and false at once, the image I made replacing the real image” (170). He thinks such a poem is a way of “preserving” moments, bestowing on those moments “a richer meaning” (171). Possessed by his dispossessing of Mitko by all the circumstances of his life and his psychology, he comes to a more honest understanding of his creative impulse. He takes a parting look at the boy and “it felt like a loss. Whatever I could make of him would diminish him, and I wondered whether I wasn’t really turning my back on things in making them into poems, whether instead of preserving the world I was taking refuge from it” (171). Greenwell thereby suggests that the undeniable melancholy that his character feels is, he has seen, the source for his own artistry as a novelist, playing out Freud’s intuitive understanding of the source for the creative impulse. He is not alone. As recently as 2020, Tomasz Jedrowski’s *Swimming in the Dark*, set in Poland in 1980 (and, thus, an odd hybrid of Sofia in the twenty-first century and Manhattan in the Eighties), translates a familiar story of forbidden love to a setting unfamiliar to many of his international readers. Ludwik and Janusz meet at a summer work camp. As if Jedrowski is hoping to jump over the many decades separating him from an earlier master, the author has them reading *Giovanni’s Room*. In setting the tone and direction of the upcoming love affair that is doomed by politics and religion, Jedrowski uses that book as a mourner’s kaddish for all star-crossed gay lovers, from Baldwin to our own day – those desperately missing love, acknowledged or otherwise.

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⁶ Ferber notes that Giorgio Agamben claims that “the melancholic actually lost what was never hers to have (thus maintaining a relationship with the imaginary). In this claim, we are confronted with a situation in which not only the object is lost, but the loss itself is lost as well. The difficulty to overcome such a loss stands exactly in its being without locus, in the inability to direct any ‘work’ whatsoever to anything” (Ferber 2006, n.p., endnote.2). This seems a good rationale for Greenwell’s choice of title for his novel.

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