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“Being Human and Living”: How HIV/AIDS Established a
Vocal and Visible Queer Identity Within Queer Poetry
Leading into the 21st Century

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Abstract

This paper examines how the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s–1990s affected the ways in which queer poets wrote about queer identity. Firstly, it outlines the trends of queer poetry prior to the AIDS crisis and how those trends developed once the AIDS crisis worsened. It then discusses the theoretical approaches of Lee Edelman and José Muñoz, arguing on Muñoz’s side that queerness focuses on futurity. The themes of urgency, honesty, and the lived queer experience are all discussed alongside the works of queer poets writing during the 1980s and 1990s in order to make the argument that queer poetry is focused on a futurity in which queerness is able to exist on even ground with heteronormative society. Part of this argument states that death is a driving force for queers to strive for life, specifically a future generation that may live outside the confines of “straight” and “gay.”

Introduction

An Introduction to the AIDS Epidemic

In the summer of 1981, five gay men in Los Angeles were reported by the CDC to have developed a type of a rare lung infection. Two of these men died. The same day, a doctor on the opposite end of the country in New York City called the CDC to report a rash outbreak of disturbingly aggressive cancers among gay men. The same week that the CDC released their initial report, there were similar outbreaks recorded around the nation. The beginning of the HIV/AIDS crisis was a time driven by unprecedented panic in a country where the speed of infection outpaced even the most proactive doctors. Part of what made this outbreak so disturbing was its lack of official diagnosis, which didn't come until a horrific two years later—with just shy of 1,300 deaths totaled since the disease was first reported in 1981 (Harr & Kane, 2008). Part of the delay in this discovery comes from the Reagan administration's apathetic response to AIDS, in which many press conferences were filled with laughter when the very subject of the gay plague was mentioned (Huber, 2018). President Reagan's cabinet largely denied the President's knowledge of the disease until 1983, and even after the administration admitted to the existence of the disease, there was much effort on their part to slow the access to HIV/AIDS medication as well as defund or non-prioritize HIV/AIDS research (Leland 2017).

However, gay communities throughout the country, specifically in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York City, were already becoming aware in 1981 that the beginnings of an epidemic were at hand. The list of infection seemed to grow exponentially in those first two years, and by the end of that first summer, acclaimed writer and activist Larry Kramer held an assembly in NYC with over 80 gay men asking them to contribute money to research because, as he recalls later in his life, "people really were dying like flies (Leland, 2017). Kramer, a lifelong gay rights activist and founder of several AIDS coalitions including ACT-UP and the Gay Men's Health Crisis, authored the autobiographical play *The Normal Heart* (1985) which takes place from 1981 to 1984 and depicts his unpopularity within the NYC gay community for his adamant warnings about the oncoming "plague." Unfortunately, Kramer was opposed by many queer people in his community as strongly as those who opposed HIV/AIDS research on the foundation of homophobia (Whittington, 2012). To many, asking gay men specifically to not have sex in New York City during one of the most significant booms of gay culture to this day, felt like a betrayal of their validity as gay people. It was as much a part of their sexual identities as it was their personal identities. His play, released during the biggest wave of the crisis, was controversial in that

it was so outspoken and angry, but anger was not only justified, it was one of the only avenues through which queer people had a chance to instill change and protect their communities.

During the epidemic of the 1980s and 90s, the othering of the gay community that had been occurring for decades erupted along with the eruption of the plague, which Kramer describes in the opening of his play. Characters Craig and Mickey are sitting in the waiting room of a doctor's office when Craig asks, "Did you see that guy in there's spots?" to which Mickey replies, "You don't have those. Do you?" (Kramer, 1985) expressing in little words the indescribable anxiety that queer people have of being discovered, or of being innately "wrong," even in the case of two committed partners.

Part of what worsened the "othering" and fear-fueled hatred of queer people in the context of AIDS was the visual aspect of lesions and spots, bringing the thematic view of gays as unclean to a tangible reality. One of the founders of queer theory, Leo Bersani, details this hatred for the queer community in his work "Is the Rectum a Grave?," saying;

[The] appalling examples of this crisis (taken largely from government policy concerning AIDS, as well as from press and television coverage, in England and America) and, most interestingly, an attempt to account for the mechanisms by which a spectacle of suffering and death has unleashed and even appeared to legitimize the impulse to murder. (Bersani, 1996)

Thom Gunn discusses this visual of lesions and the non-visual othering of AIDS in his poem "The Missing". Gunn writes, "Now as I watch the progress of the plague / The friends surrounding me fall sick, grow thin / And drop away," which sets the tone for a poem largely formed around the confines of a body and how the touch of body to body shapes a communal identity (Klein, 1992). This is demonstrated in the line, "Contact of a friend led to another friend / Supple entwinement through the living mass" where Gunn refers to the physical spread of the disease in more personal terms, the way a queer person would be experiencing the spread of this plague. Gunn continues his lament over the dying body in his final stanza, "Abandoned incomplete, shape of shape, / In which exact detail shows the more strange / Trapped in unwholeness, I find no escape," which highlights "unwholeness" as similar to "unholy," bringing us back to the anxieties of not functioning "correctly" within society. Gunn's narrative of losing his lovers to the disease relies on this motif of the breakdown of a physical body in order to parallel the physical gruesomeness of AIDS at the beginning of the crisis.

However, what is perhaps more thematically interesting in this poem is its overall frankness and sexually vulnerable voice. While AIDS imposed a hierarchical death sentence on both IV drug users and queer people, the response to AIDS was defiant, honest, and relied on a theme developed in the 1950s confessional movement of poetry – the lived experience (Harr & Kane, 2008). Prior to AIDS, the trend of queer poetics was wrought with coded language and dual meanings, giving this queer poetry a duplicity of meaning that in many ways could still exist within a heteronormative space (Boone and O’Hara 1979). What we see during and post the AIDS crisis, however, is an inversion of this tradition. During the crisis, queer poets frequently wrote in a previously seldom used voice of vulgarity, vulnerability, and a seemingly hopeless cry towards a future in which queerness has the space to exist. Queerness is one of the rare themes within literature in which death plays just as large a role in the desire for hope and future as life itself does (Edelman, 2004).

This paper seeks to prove that, throughout the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 90s and through the political culture it created within queer spheres, queer writers consistently write for a future which they themselves will not live to see through writing candidly about their lived experiences as queer people and by creating an atmosphere of strength through vulnerability. One of the largest strengths in being queer at this time was being able to say that you are queer, and these poets demonstrate just that. This thesis will demonstrate how the drive towards a queer futurity, as defined by José Muñoz in what follows, has always been present, but throughout time, the existence of AIDS has served as a shove towards the future that many queer authors have written of and aspired to over generations. Although AIDS is seen by many as a drive away from life and towards a dismal future of loss and death, the queer authors of the epidemic seize an opportunity to expose the reality of queerness as necessary and natural through their lived experiences both personally and as a collective whole.

Queer Poetry before 1980

Prior to the HIV/AIDS crisis, the queer community and scholars were still debating the dichotomy of life and death as it relates to queer experiences. This dual existence of queerness is no doubt connected to the political and social realities of queer people both in the past as well as the present. There is a natural fear that comes with being openly queer in a society that contains threats of violence – which permeates to the modern day in events such as the Pulse Nightclub shooting in 2016, ostracization, and death to queer people. However, queerness is also an identity found through love, sex, and the forming of relationships in spite of these threats. Scholar Richard Zeikowitz

defines these aspects of queerness as, “how queer identities are based on a seemingly obligatory repetition of acts, gestures, and appearances which heteronormative society defines as abject Other (Zeikowitz, 2004)”. These acts and gestures hinge not only on sexual attraction to those of the same sex, but also on, “appearance, mannerisms, and speech style (Zeikowitz, 2004),” all of which help to encompass the broader meaning of the lived queer experience. It is this identification of the more visible other aspects of what defines queerness that makes the fear of discovery, as well as the trauma of secrecy, all the more real for those in the LGBTQ+ community. The continuation of this fear can be found. Thus, it’s no wonder that queer scholars have been debating for some time where the future of queerness is heading.

All these action and presentation-based aspects of queerness are considered to be performative. The theory on performative-based queer poetry (which will be explored in greater depth in chapter two of this thesis) establishes an important distinction between heterosexual expression through poetry and homosexual or bisexual expression in that, the heterosexual viewpoint has always been and will be for the foreseeable future the default mode in analyzing a speaker. It is only through the introduction of some “otherness” that the reader will gain insight into the speaker’s deviation from this assumed norm. Some pre-AIDS queer poets, such as Frank O’Hara who worked within the New York School of Poets, thus rooted much of their poetry in this ability for queer people to fade in and out of being visibly queer based on both their own behavior as well as through critiquing this assumption of the heterosexual default. One such example comes from O’Hara’s poem “Having a Coke with You” published in 1960 – just shy of a decade before Stonewall. This poem explores the “hidden in plain sight” phenomena in a time when queerness was outside of common presumption. In the poem, the tone is not one of fear or secrecy but rather of an almost boyish playfulness, entwining both art and history with a rather unpopular viewpoint on homosexuality at the time, the connection to a brighter future.

O’Hara begins with the line, “is even more fun than going to San Sebastian, Irún, Hendaye, Biarritz, Bayonne (O’Hara, 1995)” which is perhaps one of the few and most famous instances of a queer poem opening with fun. Especially during and post the HIV/AIDS epidemic, fun is seldom found at the forefront of queer poetry. Yet, in 1960, O’Hara dedicated this love poem not to fear or the inevitability of violence, but to the excitement and joy of being with a beloved in public whilst remaining what the queer community would refer to as “passing,” meaning they are not easily identified as queer. The line, “the secrecy our smiles take on before people and statuary,” further

elaborates on this awareness of their ability to “pass” as heterosexual while also experiencing a romantic date with one another. There is a duality of identity within this poem that separates the speaker from the normalcy of those around him as shown in the lines, “it is hard to believe when I’m with you that there can be anything as still / as solemn as unpleasantly definitive as statuary (O’Hara, 1995)” while also alienating him from the masterpieces of the art gallery that the speaker and his partner are in. O’Hara writes, “and what good does all the research of the Impressionists do them / when they never got the right person to stand near the tree when the sun sank (O’Hara, 1995),” which puts into question the worth of social respect and hierarchy. This is another major theme often examined in queer poetry as well as the foundational cornerstone of the antisocial thesis in queer theory. Specifically, this line calls into question queer theorist Leo Bersani’s debate on, “should a homosexual be a good citizen (Bersani, 1995)” in his book *Homos* in 1996 which will be further examined in the next section.

Essentially, O’Hara’s poem encompasses two overarching themes within queer poetry that are foundational to the creation of the genre. The first being this tension between assimilating into heteronormative society or remaining outside the social norm. The second being this euphoria of finding connection, as expressed most potently in the final two lines of the poem, “it seems they were all cheated of some marvelous experience / which is not going to go wasted on me which is why I’m telling you about it” (O’Hara, 1995). O’Hara’s final line summarizes in broad terms, the speaker’s choice to look toward the future for hope. Futurism in queerness prior to the 1980s and 1990s was not considered the main mode of thought, and many more poets followed the tradition of queer poet Marianne Moore who, “does not look at the past as a talisman for the future, and her queer archival poem-collections attest to anxiety over—rather than faith in—inheritance, continuity, and memory (Arckens, 2016)” according to scholar Elien Arckens. O’Hara is not unaware of this as scholar John Lowney notes;

[O’Hara’s poetry] self-consciously reflects on its own place in the ‘tradition of the new,’ marking him as a poet who, “levels the ‘significant’ with the mundane, thus rejecting traditional modes of poetic transcendence. His best-known poems... are most frequently cited to exemplify his interest in the ‘ordinary incident’ instead of the ‘important public’ event. (Lowney, 1991)

O’Hara’s unrelenting rejection of modernism as an aesthetic exemplifies his determination to speak to the “personism” in poetry as opposed to the political or movement-based aesthetics. Instead, Lowney argues that O’Hara’s poetics are, “informed by an acute sensitivity to the oppressive mechanisms

that an ideology which represses difference can deploy,” which speaks to the lived queer experience as a collection of moments worth capturing rather than ultimatums that speak to the past as a talismans or ever present losses.

The “lived queer experience” is a theme which this thesis returns to multiple times, and in this context, acknowledges the disconnect between the scholarship, politics, and aesthetics of queerness as well as the more personal, day-to-day experiences of queer folk. These day-to-day experiences are not as often captured in theory or political history, and are often entirely overshadowed by more notable moments such as the violence of the Stonewall riots of 1969 in New York City or the aforementioned Pulse Nightclub shooting in Orlando in 2016. The lived queer experience is further overshadowed by the repression of, or anger with, one’s inner queerness as something innately wrong or at the very least, innately othered. This othering can be seen in the works of Elizabeth Bishop and Larry Kramer (whose works will be discussed in a later section). Furthermore, the lack of space for queerness within “functioning” society as argued by Leo Bersani and his contemporary Lee Edelman discussed in the following section also add to an overshadowing of the more benign and interpersonal functions of queer life. In this lens, O’Hara does something rather unique in melding both art history and personal history within this poem, and even more notably, in letting personal history hold a higher value than art and aesthetics. Such a conclusion connects to one of the main movements to surface during the HIV/AIDS crisis – a heavy amount of poetry focusing on the lived moment rather than the speaker’s place within a broader context of queerness at that time.

However, working in opposition to O’Hara’s movement towards this more immediate mode of writing is Elizabeth Bishop who is internationally acclaimed for her tightly concise and precisely worded poetry that often expounds on the past and a myriad of losses as well as the suppression of desire. Bishop’s poetry, “much like her mentor Marianne Moore (Giragosian, 2016),” relates to many similar points brought up in the antisocial thesis of queer literature in that, Bishop’s poetics repeat this theme of anxiety over self-identity and memory of past as argued by poetic scholar Sarah Giragosian. As a lifelong closeted lesbian, Bishop remained avid in keeping personal details about her sexuality concealed although, “she wrote love poems that have sustained homoerotic readings for a number of years (Giragosian, 2016),” which serve to prove how intrinsically linked queerness is to poetic identity, even for those who are closeted. In this instance, poetic identity is referring to one’s style of writing and desires for one’s work outside of how the author may view themselves in their personal spheres of life.

Bishop authored her poem “One Art” near the end of her career in 1976, and it is arguably one of her most cited and acclaimed works. Within an incredibly tight and concise villanelle, Bishop is able to master the tones of repression, controlled grief, and the utter lack of hope for the future not only for herself, but for the existence of the future altogether. She writes, “The art of losing isn’t hard to master; / so many things seem filled with the intent / to be lost that their loss is no disaster” in the opening stanza of this poem (Bishop, 1979). In the beginning, Bishop refrains from connecting the sentiment to anything concrete, rather favoring a philosophical entrance to what will be a deeply personal narrative over a long spanse of time. Bishop goes on to account for the many losses she has experienced:

I lost my mother’s watch. And look! my last, or
next-to-last, of three loved houses went ...
I lost two cities, lovely ones. And vaster,
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.

Bishop adds up all these losses all the while claiming, with elegantly painful refrain that “none of these will bring disaster (Bishop, 1979).”

In her final stanza, Bishop introduces her most painful (and for these purposes, relevant) loss – the loss of her long-term partner Lota de Macedo Soares. If O’Hara wrote to encapsulate the hope and joy of his relationships, Bishop wrote elegies to her loss of love and future with the women she loved, specifically Lota. While O’Hara grounds his poem in hope for what’s to come, Bishop mourns what has been lost over decades using satire to draw out the wound left by losing that hope of a brighter future as seen in the stanza, “Then practice losing farther, losing faster: / places, and names, and where it was you meant / to travel” which emulates the speeding passage of time as one grows older. The presence of both Lota – who killed herself while living with Bishop – as well as the assumed presence of a more recent partner, Alice Methfessel – who left Bishop to marry a man – draws attention to Bishop’s approach to her own future as a bleak look back on all that, for her, has truly amounted to disaster.

Part of what reads as inherently queer in this poem is the heavy refrain from explicit emotion (Bidart, 1994). The speaker battles to keep her tone even, repressing the blatant loneliness she is experiencing. This duality between O’Hara’s elation and Bishop’s paranoia and loneliness speaks to a duality brought up time and time again by writers during the crisis. As scholar William Cheng writes, “closeted individuals live in anxiety of being found out, while those who are out still face pressures of fitting in (Cheng & McClary, 2016),” meaning that queer folk on either side of the spectrum face an inabil-

ity to be seen as “fitting in” with the heteronormative, structured society. Cheng goes on to say that, “Cumulatively, there’s far more theorization of gay shame than of gay pride, with the latter relegated to, as Alice Kuzniar describes, “something almost to be embarrassed about,” or at least, something that doesn’t have to be written about (Cheng & McClary, 2016),” which falls directly in line with Bishop’s mode of thought. This viewpoint on queerness’s place within literature has been extremely influential for decades of queer poets and authors, and especially during the AIDS epidemic, became, for many, impossible to maintain. However, prior to the epidemic, one of queer poetry’s most defining components was the utilization of coded language and duplicity in meaning. For example, the terms “tea” and “tearooms” while plain enough on their own are used within queer culture, specifically drag culture, to mean gossip or as of the 1920s, a site for queer men to have sex (Cook, 2012). Thus, poetry using this term would signal to those accustomed to the LGBTQ community that the poem is dealing with queer undertones.

James Baldwin, although very openly bisexual as discussed in his novel *Giovanni’s Room*, also practiced using this “coded language” when writing much of his love poetry. The traditions of such coded language have roots in many places other than merely queer aesthetics, and thus, this tradition within both poetry and song was adopted in a way by queer authors. Thus, placing the aesthetics of queer poetry within the context of many other poetic movements such as African American rhetorical traditions. One such example comes from Baldwin’s poem “Munich, Winter 1973 (for Y.S.)” which is presumably written as a love poem to a male partner. Baldwin writes in the opening stanza, “In a strange house, / a strange bed / in a strange town, / a very strange me / is waiting for you (Baldwin, 2014)”. Baldwin opens with a similar tone to Bishop’s “One Art” in that the speaker is immediately somewhat alienated from himself. Throughout the poem, Baldwin makes several allusions to a sexual relationship, but never fully acknowledges the nature of the relationship or its need for secrecy:

I lie here in this bed.
Someone teased me once,
a friend of ours –
saying that I saw your hair red
because I was not thinking
of the hair on your head.
Someone also told me,
a long time ago:
my father said to me,
It is a terrible thing,
son,
to fall into the hands of the living God.

In this section of the poem, Baldwin – using sing-songy language and rhymes – constructs a relationship that wrought with tones of secrecy and foreboding, yet he refrains from giving any concrete detail on this relationship. This middle-ground of explanation is telling for much queer poetry of Baldwin’s time. However, despite Baldwin never stating outright in “Munich, Winter 1973” that the sexual relationship takes place between two men, it was well known in both the black literary community as well as the queer literary community that Baldwin wrote from a queer perspective. Scholar Kevin McGruder in his article on black gay male writers in New York cites Baldwin and others as, “exploring their full identity in their work and empowering themselves and others with their discoveries (McGruder, 2005).”

Part of what makes Baldwin such a notable contributor to queer poetry has less to do with the explicitly queer sexual relationships in his poetry and much more to do with the internal dialogue of his speakers. The inward tension and alienation as seen in “Munich, Winter 1973” resonates strongly with the ongoing tension between those who accept their homosexuality and a culture that does not accept them. Another example of this comes from the lines, “I could not have seen red / before finding myself / in this strange, this waiting bed (Baldwin, 2014)”. Here, the enjambment between the second and third line is an exemplary case of dual meaning within queer poetics. In one reading, the speaker is claiming that he would not have been able to appreciate the beauty of his lover before “finding himself,” presumably meaning before he fully accepted his own queerness. However, another reading of these lines could be that, through connecting “finding myself” with “strange, this waiting bed” shows estrangement between the speaker’s identity prior to and post this encounter. Not only does this poem utilize this duplicity of meaning, but the simplistic language used to construct the poem differentiates Baldwin from poets like Frank O’Hara and Elizabeth Bishop. Baldwin allows the white space on the page and choppy images to speak for the silences within

the poem, which later became a huge component of AIDS poetry during the epidemic as will be seen with poet D.A. Powell in a following chapter. Baldwin used this technique consistently throughout his poetry, and especially in the twilight of his career with his essay collection *Soul on Ice*, was known as the man who, “was never afraid to say it (Baldwin 2014).” Rather, the means by which he “says it” are deeply rooted in the psychological culture of being queer – meaning he did not write for heteronormative society to understand him, but to encapsulate his own, honest experiences as a queer black man (Baldwin, 2014). Thus, through this honesty, Baldwin’s queer poetry remains extremely contemporary and influential for its resiliency and optimism.

Baldwin, who was writing in the 1970s, is somewhat mirrored by contemporary queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz. Muñoz also explored the importance of optimism within queerness in his work, which was published in 2009 (Muñoz, 2009). This look towards a hope that a utopia for queerness will someday be achieved, although a new strain of queer theory harkens back to traditions that poets like Frank O’Hara and James Baldwin were founding as early as 1950, subconsciously or otherwise. In the next chapter, the theory backbone behind queer poetry both leading up to and during the AIDS epidemic will be analyzed and apply its main theses to the poetry of AIDS.

Queer Theory, Futurity, and Optimism within Queer Theory

This section will discuss Bersani and Edelman as illustrations of negativity while comparing to Muñoz who will be discussed as an illustration of utopianism. The term “queer theory” is a relatively new term, having only been in use since 1990, and is a rapidly expanding genre for analyzing queerness within literature (Berlant & Warner, 1995). Within this field, there is an on-going debate over life vs. death, or in less definite terms, queer negativity vs. queer optimism. Queer negativity is defined by queer theorist James Bliss as, “the critique of reproductive futurity, of the family, of the politics of hope (Bliss, 2015).” This theory is encompassed in the scholarship of both Leo Bersani’s *Homos* and more recently, Lee Edelman. In opposition to this theory is queer optimism, often discussed in concert with José Esteban Muñoz’s thesis on queer utopianism, referred to as queer futurity. The majority of queer literature is analyzed and examined through one of these two modes of thought in queer theory.

In many ways, Leo Bersani initiated this conversation between negativity and optimism in his work *Homos* by posing the question, “Should a homosexual be a good citizen?” adding that, “useful thought might result from questioning the compatibility of homosexuality with civic service (Bersani, 1995).” Bersani is known for founding the antirelational thesis in queer

theory which states, essentially, that because queerness has no certitude of reproductive futurity – meaning the ability to biologically reproduce – there is no place for queerness within mainstreamed, normative society which must, by contrast, always be looking toward the future as a result of their ability to reproduce. Critics of Bersani's negativity towards queer futurity argue that, “for some queers, particularly for queers of color, hope is not something one can afford to lose and for them giving up on futurity is not an option (Bliss, 2014).” This makes it important to note that while Bersani and Edelman are both white men, Muñoz is a Latino gay man – making his outlook on futurity all the more poignant. Both Bersani and his contemporary Lee Edelman have been criticized that their, “stubborn refusal of futurity is structured by the privilege of having a guaranteed future, foreclosing the possibility that this project can speak to the concerns of non-white queers (Bliss, 2014).” Nevertheless, the antirelational thesis has been heavily influential on the readings of queer literature since the mid-1990s and into present day.

Bersani's argument of antirelationality comes in 1995, in conjuncture with the first HIV protease inhibitor which “ushers in a new era of high active retroviral therapy” according to queer historian Jennifer Brier in her book *Infectious Ideas: U.S. Political Responses to the AIDS Crisis* (Brier, 2009). During this time, the CDC and President Clinton make some of the most progressive steps in HIV/AIDS awareness and testing since the start of the AIDS crisis in 1981. However, it is this same year that Bersani publishes his thesis arguing for queer negativity and antirelationality. Partially because antiretroviral drug therapy was not readily available to everyone, a collective trauma from AIDS has not yet begun to heal. In one of Bersani's slightly older works, *Is the Rectum a Grave?*, he discusses AIDS and the ways in which, “a public health crisis has been treated like an unprecedented sexual threat (Bersani, 1995)”. The stigma surrounding STDs prior to the AIDS epidemic alone has often lead to those infected being viewed as unclean or unworthy, compounding this stigma with the preexisting prejudice against members of the LGBTQ community. This reaction to AIDS prompted his point that there has been a, “general tendency to think of AIDS as an epidemic of the future rather than a catastrophe of the present (Bersani, 1995)”. Thus, Bersani's relationship with the future has been one tinted by the political inadequacies of Reagan and his administration to properly handle the outbreak of HIV/AIDS.

By the time Bersani authored *Homos*, many queer scholars were inclined to work through his foundation. Scholar Drew Daniel writes that, “Given the harm endured and damage done to queers while living under the normative rigors of “straight time,” the dark glamour of antirelational

negativity is undeniably tempting (Daniel 2010).” The antirelational theory builds off the concept that the politics of gay rights aim to subvert the social structure of heteronormative society. Therefore, Bersani asks his audience if queerness can function within mainstream society at all, and vice versa, could mainstream society continue to function if it were populated by queer folk? Bersani seems to think not.

A contemporary of Bersani, Lee Edelman, published his book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* in 2004. Edelman’s slightly modernized version of the antirelational thesis claims that there is no place for queerness within a generational future that is reliant on reproduction to continue. A review of the anti-social thesis published by the Modern Language Association, Caserio et al. argues that

The power of Edelman's perspective partly derives from its bearing on a cult of family in the United States that never questions the value of biological reproduction and of children's sensibilities. To harp on children means to harp on parenthood; both emphases leave nonreproductive eros in the lurch. (Caserio 2006)

Edelman’s construction of the future is thus hetero-centric. In *No Future*, he defines the future as, “a reality guaranteed, not threatened by time, [but] sustained by the certainty of immortality (Edelman, 2004).” A large part of the anti-social thesis, for which Edelman is also arguing, comes from viewing queer people as abject other within society rather than viewing them as a piece of society. In this reading of queer theory in *No Future*, queerness has been in existence for some time, but further, the existence of such a concept has been struggling against societal forces that are in opposition to it. Essentially, in both Edelman and Bersani’s eyes, queerness is a lost cause, doomed to having no future. Part of this image comes from the non-reproductivity associated with gay sex. Without the assurance that the family structure of society will be reproductive, a generational anxiety is introduced to the whole of society. AIDS in many ways serves as a cumulation of this generational anxiety. In Edelman’s work, the literary image of the Child and reproductive futurism in terms of queerness is problematic not simply because queer sexuality is oftentimes non-reproductive, but rather, that queerness is inherently “negative” towards the future. In Edelman’s argument, because queers are unable to feel secure in a stabilized future, the relationship between queerness and futurism is by definition unstable due to a lack of self-realization. Thus, the queer “death drive” comes into play, referring to both the lack of a self-generated biologically fertile future for queers as well as their lack of compliance with mainstream society.

This was the atmosphere of queer theory when José Esteban Muñoz published his thesis on queer futurity in his book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* in 2009. His thesis argues for Muñoz's theory of queer optimism and queer futurity and how, despite the AIDS crisis seemingly working against the future of queerness, its cultural and literary effects were actually more future forward than either Bersani or Edelman theorized. Muñoz's thesis is built around the workings of the anti-social thesis by Edelman and Bersani but rationalizes that rather than having been in existence and moving towards dying out, queerness has actually yet to be fully realized within society. In Muñoz's words, "Queerness is not yet here... we are not yet queer (Muñoz, 2009)". The queerness Muñoz describes is one in which futurism is something to be strived for, directly opposing both Edelman and Bersani. Queer theorist Lauren Berlant also argues for this conceptualization of queer futurity, stating that, "queer commentary has been animated by a sense of belonging to a discourse world that only partly exists yet. This work aspires to create publics... that can afford sex and intimacy in sustained, unchastening ways (Berlant, 1995)." Thus, both Berlant and Muñoz recognize queerness as an ideal that has yet to be fully achieved.

Queer futurity is not so much about the death drive or lack thereof, but rather, about embracing the validity of the future being a necessity within queer commentary and queer theory. Political approaches, such as the legalization of gay marriage and the more progressive policies of Clinton during the end of the AIDS crisis cannot individually make up for a societal standard that is aggressively heteronormative—a view that is also shared by Edelman. However, as Berlant argues the creation of queer publics, "make available different understandings of membership at different times, and membership in them is more a matter of aspiration than it is an expression of an identity or a history" (Berlant, 1995). In this lens of queer theory, the existence of the aspiration justifies the relationship between queers and futurism. Queer poet and author Audre Lorde, in her book *The Cancer Journals* (1980) writes that, "there must be some way to integrate death into living, neither ignoring it nor giving in to it" (Lorde, 1980). In many ways, this is the sentiment that the queer futurity thesis argues for – the ability to reconcile queer negativity and anxiety of the self with the aspirational future that queerness strives for. The existence of AIDS within a 21st century understanding of queerness has allowed theorists the opportunity to examine the queer reaction to death and anxiety of the future in a much more urgent light than prior to AIDS. The works of activists such as Larry Kramer, and poets such as Rafael Campo, D.A. Powell, and Diamanda Galàs (Cummings, 1986) who will be discussed in the upcoming section, drives within the lived experience of queerness that propels this aspiration of optimism towards the future.

In his book *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz pairs personal experience with his theoretical work in order to demonstrate the applications of queer futurity within the lives of queer individuals. In one example, Muñoz describes his growing up in the L.A. punk scene of the 1980s, writing that, “through what I call the utopian critique function of punk rock, I was able to imagine a time and a place that was not yet there, a place where I tried to live (Muñoz, 2009).” In this section, Muñoz also outlines a friendship which helped his own queer identity stabilize within the confines of the time and place in which he did actually live:

I started hanging out with an artist, Kevin McCarty, with whom I shared an interest in punk and postpunk music, subculture, and utopia. Our friendship has endured various mutations, moments of volatility, and great fun, and our mutual neuroses have fueled our queer intimacy. Our friendship is ultimately based on convergent worldviews in relation to politics and aesthetics. (Muñoz, 2009)

The existence of “othered” subcultures, such as punk and queerism, reflects back on Berlant’s argument for queer publics and has been mirrored in the experiences of many queers who initially integrated themselves within subcultures before truly reconciling with their queer identities. One such modern example comes from transgender frontwoman of the punk band, Against Me!, Laura Jane Grace. Grace also discusses the parallels between her queer identity and her affiliation with punk subculture of the late 1990s and early 2000s in her book *Tranny* (Grace, 2016).

The queer reactions to a heteronormative society which itself has, intentionally or inadvertently, led to a systematic oppression of queerness. Muñoz, in his conclusion chapter “Take Ecstasy with Me,” “we must vacate the here and now for a then and there... We need to step out of the rigid conceptualization that is a straight present (Muñoz 2009).” This further emphasizes the point of queer futurity that aspiration is vital to the existence of queerness, but more importantly, it emphasizes that this future is obtainable. As opposed to Bersani and Edelman’s stance that heteronormativity is the irrefutable default of our society, Muñoz and his colleagues deny that the current hierarchy of society is the natural default. It is also important to note that of these three theorists, Muñoz is not only the sole queer man of color, but that this identity is embraced and discussed throughout much of his scholarly work and makes an argument for the systematic exclusion of queers of color within queer dialogue.

Part of what Edelman and Bersani deny so adamantly is the necessity of hope, as outlined by James Bliss, and another part of this denial comes from the draw of believing queerness will forever be a doomed, futureless failure. Surely, the lived experiences of collective queerness have done more than enough to substantiate these anxieties. However, perhaps one of the biggest rebuttals to this argument for the queer death drive and queer negativity is the actual responses to AIDS from queer poets of the AIDS crisis. As will be seen in the next chapter, these poets respond with unprecedented urgency, honesty, and vulnerability which only furthers Muñoz and Berlant's stance that queer futurity is a reality which will someday become fully realized.

Urgency, Honesty, and Lived Experience in AIDS Poetry

Prior to the 1980s and early 1990s AIDS epidemic, the gay communities of the states went through what is known as the "gay liberation movement" which lasted throughout most of the 1970s. This movement was sparked by the Stonewall riots in New York City in the summer of 1969, most famously known to have begun when a black transgender woman named Martha Johnson threw a brick at a cop. The Stonewall riots began when cops raided a known gay bar, the Stonewall Inn, and a violence escalated between cops and members of the queer community. In the wake of these riots, there was a cultural push towards queers being more "open and out," with organizations such as the Gay Liberation Front making some of the first strides in making sexuality a political issue (Lewis, 2016).

Thus, leading into the AIDS crisis, there was already in motion a push towards queerness coming more into the political and social spheres of this heteronormative society. Poets such as Allen Ginsberg were at the forefront of this movement being reflected within poetry, however even during the 1970s, queer poetry often took on coded form, as typified by the works of Frank O'Hara, James Baldwin, and Elizabeth Bishop. However, partially due to the speed with which the disease was killing queer people and partially due to the lack of response from medical and political groups, AIDS poetry altered the queer voice with extreme speed. The coded language often used by writers such as O'Hara, Baldwin, and Bishop began to fall away in favor of more aggressive and direct speech. Poets of this time voice openly both romantic and sexual narratives of same-sex love, and not only openly, but some almost vulgarly as seen with Ginsberg's poem "Sphincter" which will be analyzed shortly. The sentiment of queerness not needing to be written about was not only becoming antiquated but becoming dangerous as the bodies piled up. Larry Kramer recalls the death toll in New York City:

In the Village, you couldn't walk down the street without running into somebody who said: 'Have you heard about so and so? He just died.' Sometimes you could learn about three or four people just walking the dog. I started making a list of how many people I knew, and it was hundreds. People don't comprehend that. People really were dying like flies. (Leland, 2017)

In reaction to the lack of response from their government coupled with extreme loss, queer poets recognized an urgency to reconcile themselves with their identities not only to gain civil rights, but also to save their communities from AIDS. More so, poets recognized a deep longing within themselves and their communities to be represented. Up to this point, much of queer contributions to literature have consisted of constantly toning-down their identities and experiences. In "How Hopeful the Queer," scholars Cheng & McClary write, "Much of queer theory is queer pride insofar as it contributes to compassionate understandings of diversity, tolerance, and justice, albeit via gloomy and tortuous avenues of inquiry (Cheng & McClary 2016)"; however during this crisis, pride was something that was highly confined to those communities that were already queer and did not extend into realms of life deemed heterosexual-dominant. AIDS forced poets to confront the majority of society not so much with pride but with honesty which is not to say it was devoid of doubt and shame but simply that queerness has a future within society and that the experiences of the community are relevant to society as a whole.

Scholar Joanne Rendell comments that "the disease, in its purely pragmatic effects on health and time, has led to, "the need to trim artistic endeavors... writers have turned to 'short books' and poetry to make their urgent responses to AIDS (Rendell, 2002)." This draws a direct link between the medical realities of the disease and the poetics that the disease drove. This urgency to provide representation can be seen in the shortening of queer poetry into short prose and punchy poems as well as through this confrontational acknowledgement of the author's own personal queerness. The poets writing about AIDS at this time do not appear to be seeking conformity or forgiveness, but rather acknowledgement for their lived experiences – sometimes even outside of the political sphere. In this way, AIDS compelled queer literature to mold itself after the confessional movement of the 1950s by prioritizing the capture of this lived experience over aesthetics or poetic ideals. The poems this section will analyze show a definite trend in the queer genre toward tones of personal honesty and urgency to articulate the anxiety and loss of life experienced during the height of the crisis.

This section of analysis will demonstrate how queerness plays an undeniably influential role in literature as whole, and that specifically due to the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s and early 90s queer poets were influenced to write with a new honesty and urgency in order to present their lived experiences as queer people. The gruesomeness of AIDS led many queer poets during this time to reflect similar values to that of Leo Bersani's 1995 anti-relational thesis, in part, because queer people were being shunned with even more disgust and aggression than before the epidemic. As Bersani writes, AIDS provided the means "by which a spectacle of suffering and death has unleashed and even appeared to legitimize the impulse to murder (Bersani, 1995)." This was coupled with the reality of how many people were truly dying with no government aid in place to prevent the spread of disease (O'Hara, 1996). The mass death that quickly became a familiar reality to those in the gay scenes of big cities, but particularly in New York, became emblematic of a new approach to writing queer voices. However, despite the ease of falling into such pessimistic approaches to queerness, many more queer authors worked to explore how queerness actually helps to construct vital parts of society, specifically within the realm of literature.

One such early example comes from Allen Ginsberg in his poem "Sphincter." Ginsberg's poem discusses growing old during the beginnings of the AIDS epidemic, opening with the lines, "I hope my good old asshole holds out / sixty years it's been mostly okay / tho in Bolivia a fissure operation (Klein, 1992)," where Ginsberg marries the gore expected from AIDS poetry with the physicalities of gay sex as well as how sex for the gay male community became forever altered because of the disease. Ginsberg addresses the role of AIDS in his reflections through the lines, "Now AIDS makes it shy, but still / eager to serve / out with the dumps, in with the / orgasmic condom'd friend (Klein, 1992)." This new "shyness" of his sexuality speaks to the accumulation of fear and shame that AIDS aroused even in those who were quite openly gay. Yet, "eager to serve" acknowledges both the universal concept of sexual desire while also making it specific to the gay community in the following two lines. This poem represents one of the main shifts seen in queer poetry during and post the AIDS crisis. Ginsberg demonstrates not only that eloquence isn't a requirement when discussing queerness and sex, but neither is coded language or hidden meaning, as seen in works like "One Art." Of course, one could make the argument that the frankness with which queer authors begin to write during this time has as much to do with progressive political movements, like the Gay Liberation Movement, and a more modernized society. While this is undoubtedly a factor, the sheer desperation and fear created by the epidemic gave the final push for these developments to unfold rapidly, with vigor and honesty. As Kramer described, when the members of

a community begin dying at such a rate, the imperativeness to draw attention to the severity of this epidemic very clearly affected these developments in the written queer voice.

Another poem that deals with immediacy and sex is Carol Ebbecke's "Good Timing" in which she reflects on watching her female lover die of AIDS which, in an aggressively personal voice, she dubs "this shitty virus (Klein, 1992)." The poem takes on a conflicting tone of bitter guilt and tender lust, characterizing the nature of the relationship between the speaker and the subject very definitively as sexual, with lines such as, "I wanted to hold it to my waist, thinking / maybe I could bring you into the world again, / some way, bring you from myself," and later, "my meaning to swallow you in lust, but now / in a wash of extra blankets, hot packs in a fever, / you're caught between one blanket sheet and another (Klein, 1992)," all of which meld lust and a gentle, care-taking relationship into one.

Urgency here is utilized in two primary ways: the first being through time. Ebbecke writes, "saying you'll never hate me, I who unknowingly sought you, who inflicted this shitty virus," which, while vague in how exactly the virus was transmitted between the two women, acknowledges that it is only a matter of time before she, too, finds herself on her deathbed. She goes on to write, "just waiting for my own first loss of breath, / for sweat to come before, to be the only thing / that does (Klein, 1992)," anticipating her own death after the death of "Fran." However, urgency plays a large role in the craft of this poem as well. The speaker is rushing to reconcile her relationship with Fran before the invasive infection has eradicated what this love used to mean for her. The interweaving of lines like, "this shitty virus" with "my meaning to swallow you in lust" as well as "no posing on my part, no mistress, no angel waiting for / forgiveness..." and "just knowing the dark patches that fall back / into place (Klein, 1992)" set the tone of memory for the speaker, demonstrating the speed with which her new reality of hospitals and death have replaced this slow paced, passionate love. This poem once again utilizes the formations of the confessional poetry movement with its rawness, candor, and autobiographical structure. However, now being utilized within the confines of queerness, we see a double standard emerge as the confessional movement of the 1950s and early 1960s was almost exclusively used to discuss heteronormative society. Confessional poets such as Plath and Lowell both used this candor to discuss their heterosexual relationships and marriages, but this form before now seemed to be restricted from homosexual culture. Ebbecke reclaims these traditions in a modern context of homosexuality and queer culture, leaving much of her audience more uncomfortable than the heteronormative poets who originated these poetic traditions.

In this way, urgency is driven by the desperation to hold onto something that will soon be lost and clearly, as seen in Ebbecke's work, forces a highly confessional and honest tone of voice. We see a dramatic shift here from Elizabeth Bishop's tight-lipped approach to a queerness she perhaps felt "doesn't have to be written about" to Ebbecke and Ginsberg's blatantly sexual relationships with the same sex. There is, however, another notable change at play in both these poems. The style of language used in both has veered from the erudite language seen in works like Frank O'Hara's "Having a Coke with You" and taken a turn towards the crass and at times, vulgar. No longer are these poets overly concerned with using elevated language to mask the deeply sexual roots of their written works nor avoid detection or accusations of being indecent. These poets thrust themselves and their queerness into the light beyond any shadow of a doubt. Even outside of close, analytical readings, these poems construct a queer identity that is not only lived but is under threat. The connection to the "lived queer experience" comes from the frankness of feeling and of situation.

Another example of the move towards confessional honesty comes from gay poet and activist D.A. Powell in his collection *Repast: Tea, Lunch, and Cocktails* (2014). In the opening to his AIDS poetry collection, Powell writes, "This is not about being queer and dying. It is about being human and living (Powell 2014)" which asserts in two sentences the major argument of queer futurism, that we have not yet reached queerness and that because of this, queer people are still working to assert themselves as living human beings. José Esteban Muñoz writes that, "Bersani's formulation and others like it have inspired a decade of explorations of queer unbelonging (Caserio, et al., 2006)." However, in Muñoz's own work, he theorizes that, "Although the anti-relational approach assisted in dismantling an anti-critical understanding of the queer community, it nonetheless quickly replaced the romance of community with the romance of singularity and negativity (Muñoz, 2009)." Here, Muñoz begins to construct his argument for queerness as an ideal that is being struggled towards but has yet to be fully realized. This same notion of queerness can be seen throughout much of D.A. Powell's work.

In the *Tea* section of *Repast*, Powell includes the poem "[the goodbye to nasty habits annual ball: scott smoking and drinking]" in which he writes:

and we sweated each other away
that was the morning of burnt out butts:
dumpsters tall with those discarded abuses
the central nervous system cultivates a
garden of tropisms about. yes, it was a
Monday. (Powell, 2014)

Powell further opens up this diary-like retelling of the people and places the speaker experienced during this time. In the context of AIDS, Powell is here speaking to the dread that became innate to all social interaction for gay men. He writes in images and phrases that collect the way memory does, pooling a feeling that is founded in a dozen fragmented pieces. These remembered fragments are what define the lived queer experience within gay poetry, but more than that, Powell is marrying the two “new” movements of queer poetry brought about by AIDS within this, and other poems in his collection. This poem’s relationship to urgency is seen through both the fragmenting of memories and images as well as its overall short length, spanning just 12 lines.

This briefness in explanation is a trend throughout Powell’s collection, as is his lack of actual titles. Powell wrote the three sections of his collection separately and published them at separate times; first releasing *Tea* in 1998 as a reflection on those he lost during the crisis, then *Lunch* in 2000 and *Cocktails* in 2004, and each of these collections read as autobiographical looks back at various stages of the AIDS crisis throughout the 1980s. This collection then became known as the trilogy of the AIDS crisis. Thus, in releasing the three shorter collections as a whole, Powell, “mixes gay slang, horror-movie kitsch, shudder-inducing eroticism, and a vocabulary to rival that of Norman Rush (Leavitt, 2014),” with the most transitory aspect being this inclusion of gay slang while still maintaining a high level of transparency that these poems are, in fact, queer.

We see this technique yet again in Powell’s poem, “[the daddy purrs. he is holding a leopard speedo. tonight he takes his sugar to tea]” in which Powell’s use of gay slang such as “daddy” and “boypussy (Powell 2014)” is placed in an obviously queer context. The vocabulary used once again is of boldly sexual and vulgar nature, which furthers the claim that the immediacy and horror of AIDS brought about an aggressiveness in queer poets. By writing so openly, in such sexual and romantic terms, AIDS poets mark themselves as irrefutably gay and since their queerness is owned so wholly, poets such as Powell may further their directness as either a call to action or recognition of the damage caused by such a powerful epidemic. For instance, in the lines, “the pinguin man calls me. ‘put it on’ he says & I put it on. ‘take it off’ / I take it and take this piddling attention. my manners may be vile. I may drink from the saucer (Powell 2014).” By already confronting the reader head-on with the queerness of his speaker and of the environment within the poem, Powell cuts directly to the intimacy and power dynamics in this poem. The constant focus on power between the speaker and

his sexual partner or partners speaks to a larger sense of powerlessness in the speaker's personal identity.

This powerlessness is especially poignant when we consider the limitations placed on sex for the queer community by AIDS. Not only sex, but identity as well. Powell's "[the daddy purrs.]" demonstrates that there is still much uncertainty in the speaker's convictions about his relationship with men as seen in the final line, "someday my knuckles big as his and split. I'll try picturing what I'll have done with my hands (Powell 2014)" suggest in the future the speaker will boil over and act out against this sadomasochistic relationship. However, Powell uses language that is blatant and stark in order to circumvent uncertainty within the reader about his sexual orientation. What Powell attempts to do instead is acknowledge the universality of doubt and power struggles within relationships. Further, by placing this poem in the *Tea* section, Powell links this aggressively sexual relationship to the impending doom of AIDS which, during the time that his collection focuses on, is just slightly prior to the full-blown outbreak of AIDS in New York City. This is a sexual freedom that is soon lost once the realities of the disease are understood by the general public.

What distances this poem from previous poets who wrote about their queerness as an inner struggle (as with Frank O'Hara's "Homosexuality" discussed in the following chapter) is its triple synthesis of self-doubt with being openly gay with the threat of AIDS. The reader understands from the context of the poem that the community and way of life being described are soon to be devastated. As Powell writes, "Our fear of knowing our own HIV status was one of the powerful forces that held us together and drove us apart: we saw each other alternately as the possibility of salvation and as the possible instrument of destruction (Powell, 2014)." Powell encompasses these dichotomies of want and fear, lust and death powerfully throughout his collection. These dichotomies are much echoed by gay poet Rafael Campo, whose experience during the crisis is fraught with these contradictions. Campo worked on AIDS research and with patients throughout the height of the HIV/AIDS crisis in the early 1990s while also moonlighting as a writer, essayist, and poet. In his personal essay discussing this work, Campo claims, "The poetry of AIDS... is not simply and always about assuming control. Rewritten: it is about losing all control. It is about dying and fucking (Campo, 1993)." This statement creates conversation with Powell's that AIDS poetry is about "being human and living." Both Campo and Powell acknowledge the dire need to move away from viewing queerness as a lifestyle, as expressed by Powell:

I ran the danger of writing a collection in which death was a consequence of my “lifestyle.” (I use quotes here, because I do not really understand the difference between a life and a lifestyle, aside from the fingerpointing. I am nevertheless happy to be accused of the style). (Powell, 2014)

However, unlike Powell’s ability to delve into his queer identity, Campo was strongly encouraged by the medical community he worked for to conceal any personal connection he may have to the communities being affected by AIDS. Thus, as a gay, Puerto Rican doctor in the 1980s, Campo felt torn between his role as a research developer and caretaker, and his personal alignment with the minorities within the community being most heavily afflicted.

In his poem “What the Body Told,” he explores this chasm between doctor and gay man in the lines:

I’d look inside another person’s mouth,
And see the desolation of the world.
I’d see his genitals and think of sin.
Because my body speaks the stranger’s language,
I’ve never understood those nods and stares. (Campo, 1999)

Here, while Campo is harkening back to some of the coded language used by the queer poets of the 1950s and 1960s in the first two lines, in the following lines his direct reference to the man’s genitals and especially by drawing a kinship between the man, sin, and himself, Campo is stating clearly his queerness and how AIDS has affected his relationship not just to his community but to his inner sexual and emotional identity as well.

Campo is renowned not only for his work as a doctor and writer, but specifically within the poetry community, he is known for his skill in structured forms such as sonnets and villanelles, implementing a mastery of meter specifically iambic pentameter. This makes him a unique contributor to AIDS poetry as the majority of poets at this time – affected by the urgency movement – avoided structure in favor of raw, passion driven language. However, that is not to say that Campo’s work is not passionate. In another of his poems, “The Abdominal Exam,” Campo works with concise couplets opening with, “Before the glimmer of his sunken eyes, / What question could I answer with my lies?” (Campo, 1999). Once again, Campo acknowledges the tension between empathizing greatly with the fear of a gay man diagnosed with AIDS and his role as impartial doctor. Being the one to deliver a death sentence to this man and his boyfriend takes a great toll on the speaker both for the sake of the couple and for his own fears of catching the virus:

This hunger that announces death is near,
And as I touch him, cold and cavalier,
The language of beneath the diaphragm
Has told me where it's coming from
And where I'm going, too: soft skin to rocks,
The body reveling until it wrecks. (Campo, 1999)

This poem helps to further demonstrate how, while working within the confines of meter, the overwhelming push towards openness about one's queerness consumes the speaker. The final couplet of the poem reads, "Against the same internal, hidden shoal, / The treasures we can't hide, our swallowed gold" which speaks to this inability to remain closeted during such a time of crisis. Campo is also highlighting an important shift away from resentment at one's queerness, a motif expressed in both James Baldwin and Frank O'Hara's works, and instead, views this openness as true freedom. Although the couple is being met with death, their lives are honest whereas it is the closeted doctor who is consumed with dread.

Perhaps no poem better encompasses Campo's ability to blend the medical horrors of AIDS with the queer culture of the time than his poem "Her Final Show" in which, in typical Campo fashion, he reflects on the last moments of a patient dying of AIDS complications. He opens this tightly constructed, vivid poem with the lines, "She said it was a better way to die / Than most; she seemed relieved, almost at peace (Campo, 1999)." In this way, any reader would immediately take the subject to be a sadly elegant woman laying on her deathbed. However, as Campo provides the reader with more and more details about the woman's appearance, it becomes clear when we read through a queer lens that this is a drag queen. The following lines showcase Campo's astute references to drag culture that people outside of this community might not recognize initially:

the Opium / so daintily applied behind her ears...
Her shade of eyeshadow was emerald green
She clutched her favorite stones. Her final show.
She'd worn them all... (Campo, 1999)

In fact, Campo waits until the last third of the poem to actually state plainly the situation being described, writing, "The gifts of drag queens dead of AIDS. 'Those girls, / they gave me so much strength,' she whispered (Campo, 1999)." Campo recognizes that readers from a heterosexual background may be surprised by the revelation that the dying woman is, in fact, a drag queen. However, he takes this shock and uses it to propel the reader to the queen's last words. By placing her dying words alongside this revelation, the

reader is forced to acknowledge the legitimacy of the queen's connection with her community and the devastating reality of losing so many members of it. The speaker's feelings on the queen in the final two lines of the poem leaves the reader with a hollow ache: "...I straightened her red wig / Before pronouncing her to no applause (Campo, 1999)." Those of the queer and drag communities will of course understand on a deeper level the tragedy of this line, "to no applause," but through Campo's introduction not only of the queen's beauty, but of her own delicate pride in her stones, perfume, and makeup, even those outside of these spheres are able to feel the complexities of her character and the experiences that she has lived.

In discussing this poem, Joanne Rendell comments that, "Campo... disrupts the repetitive way "otherings" are maintained and reproduced," going on to write that, "the doctor straightening the wig and 'pronouncing' to 'no applause', fuses conflicting images of the pronouncement, preparations and applause of a... ceremony, with the image of the drag show, and with the image and pronouncements of death (Rendell, 2002)." In Rendell's analysis, she also argues that by drawing performative parallels between heteronormative culture and queerness, Campo is constructing an argument for queerness's relevance to literature as well as society. His language in this poem is intentional in the way that it shuns the idea of drag and queerness as a "lifestyle" and prefers language that humanizes the queen's life and the experiences she has had within the drag scene. Her relationship to her fellow queens and her pride in her own performative beauty all stand in opposition to the claim that queers are innately anti-social and in opposition to social hierarchy and societal structures. Rather, the works of Rafael Campo and D.A. Powell work in concert to build an image of light, connection, and passion within the queer community. This passion, in opposition Leo Bersani's anti-social thesis, demonstrates a strong desire within queer poets and queer culture to fight towards acknowledgement, validity, and especially in the context of AIDS, a desire to live and bring queerness into a more livable future.

Conclusion

Has AIDS Brought Us Closer to Queer Futurity?

In the mid-1990s, as the immediacy of the AIDS crisis was dying down partially due to the first waves of effective treatment for HIV/AIDS, queer activism began to shift its focus towards more legal barriers to queerness such as the legalization of gay marriage as well as employment and housing protections for queer individuals.

In 2018, Larry Kramer reflects on this shifting of gay politics in a New York Times piece;

I know I'm lucky to be alive. I have fought very hard to get here. I have had a liver transplant. I've lived long enough to see an anti-retroviral therapy become available. I have been able to legally marry the man I've loved for many years. Why then do I still feel so destitute and abandoned? Surely all gay people fall into the same category as I. (Kramer, 2018)

Abandonment, as discussed by Kramer has not only to do with the current political atmosphere, but also with something on a deeper, cultural level. The urgency of AIDS is no longer the forefront of the fight for gay rights, and this in many ways has shaken the foundation of what queer honesty and expression has been built upon—namely that the equation of death and AIDS has become less necessary as treatment options have improved. Kramer highlights a point that much of the heteronormative-dominant inexistence today will never comprehend—that the legalization of gay marriage has never been the fight.

The fight Kramer refers to is not a fight to become acclimated within heteronormative society as a queer person, but rather, for queerness to be viewed as on equal footing with heterosexuality. Queerness as an identity has never sought to find its place within this normative culture, but rather, it has sought for a future devoid of such markers of success. Similarly, the poetry of AIDS has not been in pursuit of finding a place within heteronormativity, but in pursuit of broadening that which is understood to be culture as a whole. Simply put, queer futurity is not about becoming normative. Queer futurity is founded on and builds on the notion that there is a space and time in which queerness is not seen as an abject other, in which the lived queer experience will always vary from hetero experience but that these experiences will coexist in a society that sees neither as dominant or more relevant than the other. The aggressive tactics by which queer AIDS poets sought to be seen and acknowledged during the crisis were also aggressive in their overarching desire to be seen for and acknowledged for their actualities. It feels somewhat patronizing for a society that has argued for the extinction of queerness, albeit at many times only passively, to then invite this culture into their normative society—so long as queer people still fit in to this concept of domesticity.

This is much of what Kramer feels in his somewhat eulogy of an article. The poetry of AIDS speaks to heartbreak, abandonment, rage, death, sexual desire, defiance, and life. Within these poems, there is a lived element that cannot be fully brought into theoretical or sociological approaches to queer-

ness. However, part of what makes this era of queer poetry so important to the understanding of where queerness in literature is today is the necessity of its aggression and vulgarity. The ultimate struggle of poets at this time was the reconciling of the desire to exist within their untainted subcultures and the vital necessity to expand outside of them.

In 1954 – almost 30 years prior to the AIDS crisis – Frank O’Hara published his poem “Homosexuality” which opens with the line, “So we are taking off our masks, are we, and keeping / our mouths shut? as if we’d been pierced by a glance!” (O’Hara, 1995)” This outrage and defiance set in the opening lines is directed not at the heteronormative, McCarthyite society which dominated O’Hara’s lifetime but rather, at the gays and queers within O’Hara’s own circles. He goes on to denying that the judgement of normative society, the threat of arrest, and the imminence of violence are worthy of the anxiety of many gays, lesbians, and bisexuals at the time. Rather, O’Hara writes, “It’s wonderful to admire oneself / with complete candor, tallying up the merits of each / of the latrines,” creating an ode to the very intimate aspects of queerness that many queers people, specifically queer men, of his time would be familiar with. However, the most poignant lines of this poem come in the final segment of the piece, in which he writes:

and there are the divine ones, who drag themselves up
and down the lengthening shadow of an Abyssinian head
in the dust, trailing their long elegant heels of hot air
crying to confuse the brave ‘It’s a summer day,
and I want to be wanted more than anything else in the world
(O’Hara, 1996)

Here, O’Hara creates a wonderful duplicity of meaning from the enjambed line “drag themselves up / and down the lengthening shadow” which will signal more immediately to those immersed in queer culture that these “divine ones” are drag queens and possibly prostitutes in drag. This intimate calling to those of queer culture penetrates this silence called out in the opening couplet and seems to rally around all that entails queerness, even in such a dangerous time. His final quote, “I want to be wanted more than anything else in the world” creates deep, lustful and vulnerable longing in all that read it—both straight and gay—and more importantly, echoes into the present-day existence of queerness. The deeply held desire to be wanted within society without being asked to normalize is what Kramer is harkening to when he writes that “surely all gay people fall into the same category as I,” even penetrating the theorists such as Berlant and Muñoz who write urgently and vulnerably for a queer future that has the space to exist, untainted by normalized expectations of domesticity and normativity.

Has AIDS drawn us closer to the utopian queer futurity of Muñoz? This thesis has sought to prove just that. However, this utopian future is one that has always existed. Even in the 1950s, with this very future outlawed by a heteronormative country in a heteronormative world, the aspiration and hope has been there, waiting for its final shove into the present.

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