To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by William Dustin Parrott entitled "Unsafe: Sex and Death in Contemporary Gay Culture." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

________________________

Allen Dunn, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Misty Anderson

________________________

Amy J. Elias

________________________

Accepted for the Council:

________________________

Carolyn R. Hodges, Vice Provost
And Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)
UNSAFE:
SEX AND DEATH IN CONTEMPORARY GAY CULTURE

A Thesis
Presented for the Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

William Dustin Parrott
August 2007
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Jeff.
ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the role of sex and death in contemporary gay male culture, particularly focusing on issues surrounding HIV/AIDS and “safe sex” practices, specifically bug-chasing. By analyzing relevant literature and public discourse the topic of bug-chasing, or intentional pursuit of HIV sero-conversion, is placed in appropriate context. The work of Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Leo Bersani is employed in order to frame bug-chasing as a means of radical sexual self-determination which attempts to transcend the bonds of the administered bourgeois self, and ultimately results in an act of will akin to Martin Heidegger’s being-towards-death.
Preface

“Dying is an art, like everything else.”

I'll save you from that Sunday sermon.
Boy I think you need a conversion,
Body and soul….
--Tori Amos, “Body and Soul”

It is 2007. I am twenty-five years old; I have been twenty-five for less than one month. I have been thinking lately, am I having a quarter-life crisis? But inevitably that leads me to think, what hubris—to assume I’m one-fourth the way through a life that might reasonably end tomorrow, or the next day, five years from now, or ten, or twenty. In which case, any crisis I might be having at the moment is closer to the half-life variety. Of course, none of this is remarkable, particularly. I am a young man in the Western world, privileged in some ways, not-so-privileged in others, and I am experiencing the kind of existential anxiety which has been no stranger to modern humankind. But—then again…

I am a gay young man, or queer, as I've come in my old age to prefer. I was born in the same year that the Center for Disease Control discovered that the HIV virus was linked to blood; the same year that the Gay Men’s Health Crisis was founded in New York City; the same year that the term AIDS—Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome—was used for the first time (Timeline), exactly one month and one day after I entered the world, wailing loud, with loud red hair to match. Fire-engine red, my mother likes to report the delivering doctor said; if there was a fire I was sent to put out, I must confess I’ve failed—I've
succeeded rather in igniting a few flames, however. Some of the burning was intentional.

To my current knowledge, right now, at this moment, I am HIV-negative. There is no particular reason why this is the case.

I’ve known that sex was a risky proposition since before I understood what sex actually was. I knew sex carried the risk of AIDS since before I knew what semen was, or what it meant to ejaculate. I grew up in the midst of 1980’s AIDS-panic public sex education. As a child, I heard the word *condom* more than I heard the word *love*, or *passion*, or *soul*.

I was eighteen years old, a college freshman, when I had my first casual sexual encounter. It thrilled me. It terrified me. I’ll spare you the minute details, but nothing all that risky took place—nothing much at all, really—and yet I was convinced I had contracted AIDS. From five minutes of clumsy, inexpert, absolutely spine-gripping heavy petting in the dark of a bass-ridden dance club, I thought I had tasted and swallowed the poison that would be the end of me. I called my best friend the next morning, breathing hard and falling fast, and asked her to talk me through making an appointment at the campus clinic, so I could be sure. If my life was all but over, I wanted to know.

I knew everything about the risks. I knew nothing about the risks.

Soon enough I figured out I was, well, fine. And soon enough again I discovered that there was a whole range of pleasures I hadn’t given enough thought, or practice. When was the moment I stopped being so damn afraid? I
can’t remember. I remember before, and after. But not the moment I slipped out of fear’s sweaty, aggrieved clutches.

And so there is a catalogue of acts and days and moments in which I did what human beings have never ceased doing, in all these many thousand years: I threw caution to the warm, siren wind. I chose yes before no. I chose now before later—now before never. I did the thing I wanted to do in the face of the thing I had always been told to fear the most. I wonder now—have I ever feared death the most? What do I fear the most?

I knew about bug-chasing before I knew the term. As a college sophomore I read David Leavitt’s novella “The Infection Scene”; I thought it a marvelous work of dark and desirous wonder. I thought the story’s protagonists were remarkable creations of a writer’s mind, and only that. I had no notion that the two young men, one positive, one negative, were meant to represent an exploration of a larger phenomenon.

One year later, my twentieth on this earth, I knew of what Leavitt wrote. Again, I shall refrain from replaying the dissonant music of the moment in question—suffice it to say a late-night, online conversation with a perfect stranger, me alone, wrapped in a blanket, cloaked in the light of a glowing screen, led to the fuller realization of the implications and meaning of “The Infection Scene”.

Shadow, and the gleaming dawn of painful knowledge, descended as an umbilical-severing knife. We are always becoming who we are.
This is my attempt to render the calculus of this human process whereby I have become singularly fascinated with the meaning of bug-chasing. *It means something*.* What does it mean? How does it mean?*

Ever a student of words and maker of worded work, my captivation with these issues is always-already mediated by my love of language and admiration of literary criticism and those thinkers who practice the art of critical theory. Make no mistake, I know full well I am no Jacques Derrida or Martin Heidegger, no Michel Foucault or Judith Butler. Yet I am inspired by the way in which these thinkers have led themselves to a grappling with their own human questions through their appreciation of texts, of signs and significations. The larger philosophical questions of these writers (What does it mean to be gendered, to have a sex/sexuality? What does it mean to be interpellated into a system of power-knowledge? What does it mean to be a creature of language, to be constructed by a complex of signs and significations?) have been colored undeniably by their understanding of language and its employment in various discourses.

It might also be worth noting that I can envision a version of this project which is larger, more extensive, which takes on more texts and a greater variety of methods and modes than a master’s thesis allows for. For the several texts and thinkers I have included here in these pages I can easily double the number in a fantasy list which brooks no limitations of time or energy or intellectual capacity. And yet what I want to do, here and elsewhere in my life, is transcend
the limitations I can by accepting those I cannot. The time and support and mind I have, the best I can do, will have to suffice.

It is in this way that I approach my own human questions—as a reader of books, a lover of words, a being of language who seeks meaning in the presence of linguistic systems and all the resulting systems which shift and shape and show who we are. As a man trying to inhabit his own possibility as a human being as best he can.

There is a poetry in my making meaning. There is a story in my questions.

What is it I love the most? What is it I fear the most?
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Introduction

*Letting the Blood In*

Blood can be *pertty*
Like a delicate man
Copper to steel, to a hinge that is faltered,
Then lets you in, lets you in, lets you in…
--Tori Amos, “Doughnut Song”\(^1\)

In the opening scene of his seminal (you should read all possible meanings of the word here) play *The Normal Heart*, Larry Kramer writes “[I]f having sex can kill you, doesn’t anybody with half a brain stop fucking?” (38).

Written in 1985 *The Normal Heart* was praised far and wide (not least by Larry Kramer himself) for its righteous bravery in the face of ignorance and homophobia surrounding the then-emerging public debate about HIV/AIDS. Then, and since that time, Kramer has been painted by himself and others as a martyr figure, a prophet of the gay community, a man to out-Tiresias Tiresias. In *The Normal Heart* Ned Weeks, the very thinly-veiled character based on Kramer himself, is told that he is “exactly what’s needed now” (37) and the play is full of long-winded and highly exclamatory speeches made by Weeks exhorting gay men to heed his warnings. While it is certainly true that many of *The Normal Heart*’s dire predictions and observations came to a terrible fruition (mostly regarding the government’s response to HIV/AIDS as a public health issue), the trajectory of the HIV/AIDS pandemic among gay men has not been quite so straight-to-hell as Kramer and many mainstream discussions of the virus would indicate. The cultural and psychological implications of the virus have proven to

\(^1\) The spelling “pertty” is not an error. Amos intentionally uses the vernacular pronunciation of her native South.
be far more complex than *The Normal Heart* indicates—and yet any number of other works touching on gay lives in the shadow of the pandemic have not captured the complexities of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, either. The cottage industry of art-in-response-to-AIDS has yielded a veritable host of patient, suffering victims; bitter, enraged victims; crusading, righteous victims. For variety, these works have patient, suffering caretakers; bitter, enraged caretakers; crusading, righteous caretakers. I exaggerate, surely, but the point to be made is that art responding to AIDS has all too often eschewed messy complexity for a more manageable arrangement of sentiment and politics.

However, the gay male community on the ground, as it were, has been necessarily creative and inventive in dealing with tragedy and difficulty in the past; their response to the HIV/AIDS virus is no exception. And yet not all responses have been given fair play in the public conversation—both within and without the gay community—or in much contemporary gay art. Kramer’s oversimplification of gay male psychology and sexuality precedes a host of other works, by and about gay men, which neglect the fundamentally challenging and intricate complications of potential responses to HIV/AIDS, and the unavoidably cathected interplay of sex, danger, life, and death.

It is my hope, ultimately, to shed some light on one particular response to HIV/AIDS among gay men which has heretofore often been met with some variation of repulsion, refusal, disavowal, and bewilderment: namely (and the name itself is still widely unknown) I wish to address the phenomenon of bug-chasing.
First brought to wide attention in an article published by *Rolling Stone* magazine in January 2003 (“Bug Chasers: The men who long to be HIV +.”), “bug-chasing” is the term used to describe the act of a sero-negative person seeking out and knowingly attempting to contract the HIV virus from an infected partner. The participants, sometimes referred to as Gift-Seekers (uninfected partners) and Gift-Givers (infected partners), wittingly practice unprotected sex in order to achieve the sero-conversion of the uninfected partner. Since the *Rolling Stone* article was published, bug-chasing has been the subject of heated if hushed debate among gay men, and, as a community, the gay male population has, to date, failed to take seriously the experience or desires of those who engage in bug-chasing and even often fails to acknowledge the patent and latent differences between bug-chasers and men who simply elect to have unprotected sex. It is my belief that bug-chasing and those who engage in it deserve recognition (political, ethical, and aesthetic—all mutually interdependent) of their particular experience, which is necessarily different than those who engage in unprotected sex with no conscious intention of contracting the HIV virus.

I am consciously and adamantly separating here the notion of simple “promiscuity” (a term loathsome for the burden of its oppressive sociopolitical baggage) from bug-chasing, which may or may not be tied to a high number of sex partners and other aspects of “promiscuity”. While it is true that there likely is a strong correlation between multiple partners/anonymous sex and bug-chasing in many cases, the two are not the same, and one does not necessitate the
other. The surface realities of bug-chasing do not tell the whole story, and even in cases of “promiscuous” bug-chasers there needs to be some appreciation that the relationship between frequency of sexual activity, number of partners, and whether a person bug-chases, is not strictly causal.

The level of inspection and codification that is aimed at sexual matters, however, is fraught with any number of inconsistencies and contradictions, as the degree of surveillance and interrogation aimed at sexuality does not result in an equivalent measure of understanding. In sexual conversations, the scales are tilted heavily towards reactionary responses. Sexuality remains an accepted arena of discrimination and condemnation (Foucault would remind us that notions of sexuality exist for such purposes), and sexual choices (unlike religious choices, for instance, or certain other politically-inflected aspects of identity and ideology) are routinely met with an accepted public outcry and querulous scrutiny. This is the point at which bug-chasing becomes viable as a ground for resistance.

I turn to Foucault here again for what is perhaps the boldest of his claims in *The History of Sexuality*:

It is the agency of sex that we must break away from, if we aim—through a tactical reversal of the various mechanisms of sexuality—to counter the grips of power with the claims of bodies, pleasures, and knowledges, in

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2 The best example of this from literature is Leavitt’s “The Infection Scene”. In the novella one young man pursues infection not through multiple partners or indiscriminate sex, but from his HIV-positive committed lover. The act is one of sharing, bonding, and deepest love in the mind of the HIV-negative partner; he has no desire to achieve infection by an unknown lover or a random act of physical passion.
their multiplicity and their possibility of resistance. The rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasures. (157)

Foucault’s differentiation between an ordered structure of mechanized and administered sexuality on the one hand and “bodies and pleasures,” which in their “multiplicity” resist stratification and organization, on the other, enables a perception of sexual acts not seen as following or deviating from reified norms, but perceived as various possibilities for pleasure, bodied and embodied.

I am aware that it may seem curious to some that I frame the issue as one of justice rather than simply an issue of knowledge. While it is certainly true that bug-chasing needs to be understood in order for the larger issues of HIV/AIDS to be adequately represented, it is also the case that knowledge does not equal justice, and knowledge itself would not result in respect for the experiences of gay men who engage in bug-chasing. The continued demonization of gay men for their sexual habits is an outcome I do not wish to support, even if I cannot halt it. This is a rhetoric of justice in some part drawn from identity politics, and while I find many aspects of identity politics troubling, there is great value to be taken from a pursuit of ideological space and political recognition for marginalized people. And as Judith Butler so rightly acknowledges, “Although the political discourses that mobilize identity categories tend to cultivate identifications in the service of a political goal, it may be that the persistence of disidentification is equally crucial to the rearticulation of democratic contestation” (Bodies that Matter 4) (italics in original). You may consider my use of rhetoric which echoes
that of identity politics an appropriation for the possibilities of disidentity politics. I am not entirely certain what the appropriate measure of recognition would look like for bug-chasers (the rearticulation of which Butler speaks is still struggling to gain ground), though I hope to go some way in establishing a foundation for the conversation which might arrive at a better reckoning.

Of course, before one arrives at the specific realities of the bug-chasing phenomenon, it is necessary to consider gay male attitudes towards sex in general and their perception of the level of risk which accompanies “safe” and “unsafe” sex acts—and how these things may or may not lead to their acceptance of mortality among sexually active gay males living in the time of the HIV/AIDS virus.

For decades, since the beginnings of gay enfranchisement as a group fighting for civil rights and human understanding, a good deal of lip service has been paid to the idea that gay male culture is sex-obsessed, irredicibly and undeniably sex-positive; the brave (Jim Grimsley, Paul Russell, Ethan Mordden, Michael Cunningham, David Leavitt) have endeavored to show that this is not, in fact, the case—that gay men have struggled and still struggle with sexuality and their own attitudes towards sex. David Nimmons’ *The Soul Beneath the Skin: The Unseen Hearts and Habits of Gay Men* and Michael Bronski’s *The Pleasure Principle: Sex, Backlash, and the Struggle for Gay Freedom* are two works which have explored the conflict surrounding sex in the gay male community. Among other things these texts illustrate that while gay sexuality receives a kind of lewd and sensational display in the contemporary media, the visibility of gay sex both
within and without the gay community does not equate to a tacit acceptance or unadulterated celebration of sexuality. The fears and taboos which shape and regulate human sexuality in general (prohibitions against the penetrated male body, against the transmission of semen in non-procreative sex, against the transgressions brought about by pursuit of unsanctioned pleasures) have an impact on gay sexuality as well, and the resulting limitations are just as present among gay men as they are among the larger population. It is my belief that the range of human responses to the HIV/AIDS virus, but most particularly bug-chasing, represents a crucible of fevered complexity, a complexity which includes no shortage of sex-negative prejudices among gay men.

In order to convey the enormous complexity of these issues and the ever-more complicated conversation occurring about and among gay men regarding sex in the time of HIV/AIDS, I will address a range of texts. Journalistic reports, sociological studies, and psychological research will all play a role through my references to Michael Shernoff’s *Without Condoms: Unprotected Sex, Gay Men, and Barebacking* and articles from popular mass media; works of gay film and literature such as Kramer’s *The Normal Heart*, William M. Hoffman’s *As Is*, Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*, David Leavitt’s novella “The Infection Scene,” and “Tiara” by Mark Doty will all figure importantly in my exploration of these topics. Likewise, my use of criticism and theory will be diverse—Leo Bersani’s work in Queer Theory, Judith Butler’s studies of the body and bodied discourses, Heidegger’s thoughts on being-towards-death, will all be considered. I am a student of literature and literary criticism, and so my reading of these varied texts,
whether literary or otherwise, will be the primary activity of the ensuing pages. While I do wish to read the act and something of the surrounding social, psychological context of bug-chasing, I am approaching the exploration of these issues as a student of texts, words, signs and significations. The way that salient social and psychological realities are represented textually in literature and public discourse is my material, and while a fruitful interdisciplinarity will be possible, the textuality of my materials will remain key. In other words, my position as a reader of texts and analyst of signs and significations in a tradition of literary study will dictate my modus operandi.

I will consider Judith Butler’s critical claims in *Gender Trouble* and their elaboration in *Bodies That Matter*, which include Butler’s examination of the performativity of gender and sexuality within always-already present social norms and formations, and the questions of ethical responsibility and the limits of self-knowledge in such a structure of interpellation and power. All are relevant to the question of bug-chasing in gay culture. The “regulative discourses” of sex, sexuality, and gender that Butler examines in her work give rise to coercive and restrictive cultural guidelines which limit the range of human expression and possibility. Practices which result in a substantive troubling of these cultural norms make possible an unpinning of the “discursive limits” that Butler illustrates. A sexual act which defies understanding in the existing rubric of sexual discourses stands to dismantle the limits we have taken for granted, and bug-chasing is such an act. That bug-chasing is both a sexual act and a radical gesture of will and self-determination ending in death multiplies its power as a
means of subverting and transcending the limitations of the bourgeois self and
the administrations of power-knowledge.

Underlying this, of course, is the work—particularly the later work—of
Michel Foucault; Foucault’s exploration of the ways in which modern subjects are
administered under medical institutions and the employment of medico-juridical
language in public discourse and by governmental bodies is especially germane
to a discussion of illness, and even more to a sexually transmitted condition.
Moreover, Foucault’s late-in-life attempts to engage the questions of self-care
and the uses of pleasure in his multi-volume *History of Sexuality* are significant
touchstones for my purposes here. I will, in the end, be arguing that bug-chasing
may present the most useful example of modern sexual practice which comes
close, if not all the way, to escaping the kind of subjectification that Foucault so
astutely characterized as the aim of modern implementations of power-
knowledge. Certainly, given the track and tenor of contemporary HIV/AIDS
discourse, bug-chasing manages, in important ways, to make the participating
subjects unknowable under the existing rubric. I should say here, as many cards
face-up on the table as possible, that my reading of Foucault is a consciously
Bersani-inflected reading, and Bersani’s iteration of the “gay outlaw” is the lens
through which I choose to read Foucault, and the radical sexual acts herein
represented by bug-chasing. This is, as Butler has said, a “Foucaultian mode of
emancipatory sexual politics”. She may be right that this mode is “Foucault’s
sentimental indulgence in the very emancipatory discourse his analysis…was
meant to displace” (*Gender Trouble* 123). Nonetheless, I find this version of Foucault most useful.

Through Bersani’s work, which looks towards a massive redefinition of sociality and interaction in human communities, and which sees thrillingly subversive possibilities in same-sex desire and particularly taboo same-sex sexual acts, I will read bug-chasing as a kind of advancement and ultimate iteration of these possibilities (as suggested most notably by Bersani’s famed posing of the question, “Is the Rectum a Grave?”). The “outlaw” nature of gay sexuality, taken to its conclusion in bug-chasing, denies any attempt to subsume and neutralize the act within a regulated discourse of sexuality and desire, thus leaving open possibilities of expression previously foreclosed.

Likewise, I will look to Heidegger’s articulation of being-towards-death as a crucial touchstone for reading bug-chasing. The existential necessity of facing full-on one’s own mortality and the assumption that authentic being-towards-death is an “attunement to death as an existential possibility” (Scott) are remarkably applicable to discussion of sexual risk in general in the time of AIDS, and to bug-chasing in particular. I will turn to Heidegger here as my most central means of framing bug-chasing as an intelligible and productive act of self-awareness and radical existential honesty, if not courage. For my purposes, bug-chasing is an act of resistance that provides a means for an individual to approach his life as his own, and not as a body of accidents or the end-product of bourgeois subjectification. Bug-chasing is a radical and meaningful act of self-
direction and self-possession. As such it is a positive act. Bug-chasing does not negate life; rather, it more fully engages life in its pursuit of death.

While my reading is perhaps more consciously affirmative, positive (the ironies of using this word are not lost on me), than Heidegger’s fraught and dark miasma of being and time, I feel that using Heidegger’s ideas in this way is consonant with their original intent. More, even, than a discrete and momentary act of suicide, bug-chasing constitutes at its root a full and ever-present turning towards death, the always-already possible end of existence, the constant awareness of which marks Da-sein’s fullest disclosure to himself. Heidegger’s expansive and ambiguous exploration of being-towards-death and the resolute acknowledgment of the fundament of existence which being-towards-death comprises will be the nebulae which surround the proceeding discussion.

A Note on the Format:

I have already in this brief introduction gestured numerous times towards what I see as the unavoidable complexity and diversity of gay male responses to HIV/AIDS; given that, and the wide complement of texts which I feel is most beneficial for achieving a substantial new understanding, the structure of the proceeding work will be varied, and will quite consciously take the form of pastiche (albeit an ostensibly academic version thereof). Drawing again on

3 My use of the masculine pronoun here and throughout is neither unreflective nor accidental. The phenomena I am discussing seem to be, for all intents and purposes, the province of gay men. I welcome a discussion, however, which relates these phenomena to relevant female experience. Further troubling of the gender divide is very much in line with my larger aims, both scholarly and personal, and an expansion of the ideas I am discussing here into a non-gender-specific realm would be most exciting.
Heidegger and the poetry of his work, as well as the work of theorists such as Wayne Koestenbaum, I choose a format which blurs the divide between “creative writing” and criticism, between art and scholarship.

It is crucial that these bodily, bodied discussions be given room to breathe, room to flow—room to mix and mingle and bond. Sometimes, in order to heal, it is necessary first to bleed. Sometimes the wound must remain open before it can healthfully close. Sometimes blood is the very cure required.
Chapter One

Kramer vs. the Faggots: AIDS and Performance

In my introduction I have already suggested that Larry Kramer is an unavoidable figure in any discussion touching on AIDS and gay culture. Kramer was the first and remains the most strident voice echoing down these particular corridors of history. In my introduction I make little pretense at disguising my feeling that Kramer has done harm, or rather more harm than good in the fight to make AIDS a matter of far-reaching public concern, a matter which could not be ignored by those with the power to help those who were hurting. I simply feel that the irony of Kramer masquerading as the savior-prophet of the ailing AIDS patient is far too bitter a pill to swallow. One can hardly call oneself a crusader for the dignity and rights of the AIDS patient when one also writes, in a piece titled “AIDS: We Asked for It,” “We brought AIDS on ourselves by a way of living that welcomed it. You cannot fuck indiscriminately with multiple partners, who are also doing the same, without spreading disease, a disease that for many years has also carried death. Nature always extracts a price for promiscuity” (“Sex and Sensibility”)4. By the “We” in his essay’s title Kramer means quite clearly, and quite collectively, gay men. What of heterosexual “promiscuity”? What of gay men who wouldn’t meet even Kramer’s broad, reflexive benchmark of “promiscuity”? Kramer, in this essay as elsewhere, says little or nothing of them; straights are outside his purview, and there is, apparently, very little to

4 The article was retitled “Sex and Sensibility” inside the issue of the Advocate in which it ran, though it was advertised as “AIDS: We Asked for It” on the cover.
drawn upon in the gay community when looking for examples of non-
“promiscuity,” except perhaps blameless Kramer himself and the activists who
matriculated into a particularly Kramer-identified school of thought.

I leave myself open, I am well aware, to claims that I spend too much
energy on Kramer. But his legacy is unavoidable, and given the fact that he has
been so desirous of his role as the most vocal activist since the AIDS crisis
began, it is nigh on impossible not to confront that singularity he sought so hard
to establish. And, quite simply, for anyone who wants to write humanely about
being gay and having sexual desire in the time of AIDS, it is necessary to
confront, consciously and directly, the work of a man who says time and again, in
no uncertain terms, that gay men as a group deserve to be demeaned for their
sexual lives.

It is my hope that my obvious anger—and hurt—regarding Kramer and his
legacy is contextualized by the ensuing chapter. Kramer’s play *The Normal
Heart* is the still the most influential of his writings, and it has had an enormous
effect, an effect which I will examine here in reference to other dramatic works
that have explored various realities of the AIDS pandemic: Tony Kushner’s
monumental play *Angels in America*, and William M. Hoffman’s play *As Is*, which
opened just over a month before Kramer’s *The Normal Heart*, and yet is relatively
forgotten.
“Flaming red.”

William M. Hoffman’s As Is is funny. It is ribald, rich in gay wit and pulsing sexuality. It is also disturbing and searingly painful. In its refusal to exact the price of blame, As Is is all the more effective in its dramatization of the unavoidable new burdens just beginning (in 1985) to weigh on gay men. It troubles in ways intended and unintended.

As Is concerns the same time and space as The Normal Heart: early-80s New York, doctor’s offices and hospice workers, symptoms and signs. Who has it? Who doesn’t? Who knows? Who doesn’t? Who’s paying attention? Who isn’t? What do we do now? Will it ever stop? Hoffman, though, arrives at no do-or-die conclusions. As Is is possessed of a questioning, rather than a necessarily answering, spirit. Where Kramer is willing to pronounce final sentence mere months into the epidemic’s growth, Hoffman looks toward new possibilities with the assumption that there is more to know and more to be discovered about the disease and the role gay men play in its spread. Hoffman’s characters, sick and well, do not cease to have sex, though they have many conversations about how exactly to think about sex in the light of a newly dangerous day. The following dreamlike exchange takes place in a bar after Rich, a writer, has been diagnosed with AIDS. Saul is his former lover; the Clones are ever-present denizens of the gay bar scene in the early 80s:

SAUL: I know it sounds stupid, but take care of your health.

RICH: “For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim…”

CLONE 2: In bed, I mean.
RICH: I don’t care what anybody says, I believe that somewhere, you know, _deep down_…

CLONE 1: I’ll do anything you want.

RICH: Beyond all the incredible pain and confusion, anxiety, fear, terror…

CLONE 2: Anything?

RICH: I believe that there might be…that there could be…that there is—

CLONE 1: _Anything._

…

RICH: I believe in a perfect…

CLONE 2: Mirrors…

RICH: Shining…

CLONE 1: Chains…

RICH: Powerful…

SAUL: Vitamins…

RICH: Pure…

CLONE 3: Rubber…

CLONE 2: Dildo…

SAUL: Diet…

RICH: Free…

CLONE 2: Dungeon…

SAUL: Acupuncture…
RICH: Truthful…

CLONE 3: Ten inches…

SAUL: Interferon…

RICH: Beautiful…

CLONE 3: (Approaching the bar, to the BARTENDER) Beer!

(CLONE 3 accidently spills beer on RICH)

CLONE 2: Watersports.

RICH: (Raging drunkenly) Asshole!

CLONE 1: Hey!

RICH: I’ll kill ya, faggot!

SAUL: (Intervening) Hey!...He’s been drinking.

…

RICH: Fuck all that shit!...Let Him cure me! (Shaking his fist to God in the sky) You hear me motherfucker?...Cure me!...I’m a very bad person…I wanted to go to bed with that guy….I wasn’t going to tell him about me or anything….But you want to know something?...I wouldn’t do that. I would never do that. (28-31)

Hoffman’s poetic realism is a vibrant illustration of the complex interweaving of health, sickness, desire, confusion and anger; the blurring of boundaries in the scene mirrors the inscrutability of ethical limitations which are the result of the (then) new and as yet only partially understood disease. The passage touches on beauty (the “perfect” “deep down” something that Rich is grasping for, and the mesmeric Hopkins quotation from the poet’s “Pied Beauty”),
sexual fetish ("watersports", "chains", "rubber", "dildo", "dungeon", "ten inches"), as well as medical terminology related to AIDS ("interferon"). The dreamlike commingling of these elements dramatizes the haze obscuring the new territory which Rich and Saul are struggling to enter into. In a time in which characters discuss using paper plates for dining so as to diminish the chance of contracting AIDS, in a time when it was still widely thought possible to contract AIDS through casual contact, it was brave to even broach the subject of how to keep sexual desire alive, how to find ways in which to engage that desire authentically and meaningfully. Tony Kushner’s Angels in America would take these questions leaps and bounds further, but in 1985 Hoffman’s As Is is startlingly wise and willing to imagine new sexual possibilities. Larry Kramer is all too willing to foreclose the possibility that gay men might discover ways to be together sexually which not only respond to the virus but enrich the possibilities of human sexual experience. Hoffman’s play, on the other hand, believes that gay men will find ways to engage their physical desires meaningfully and mindfully without forever losing the possibility of certain sexual acts.

Near the play’s end, Rich and Saul, together again despite Rich’s advancing illness and Saul’s still being uninfected, decide—in Rich’s hospital bed, no less—that sex is still their right, that they can have sex. What’ll they do? As Rich says, “I don’t know. Something safe” (94). And Saul is confident: “We’ll think of something” (95). They pull the privacy curtain and embark on their quest to find a new way to be together, fear, danger, love and all. Though Hoffman closes the curtain and the play does not give us any indication what the lovers
do, the door has been left opened for the audience, many of whom were presumably gay men, to discover a manner of being together that acknowledges the virus but refuses to ignore desire. Hoffman’s decision to leave this question open-ended, to refrain from detailing or dramatizing Rich and Saul’s activity behind the curtain, asks of the audience that they themselves imagine what might be possible in that space, forcing the spectators to consider for themselves what response to the virus might be imaginable for those who refuse to deny desire. This is a fine example of Foucault’s imperative—not sex and sexuality, but bodies and pleasures. The gestures, the apparatus, that Rich and Saul or any gay man might create are as yet unimagined, unarticulated. But Foucault’s interventions suggest that if the pleasurable acts they create are to be viable as gestures of resistance, they must be acts which are not subsumed under the orientations of sex and sexuality already present in medico-juridical discourse. Gay men given the sublime opportunity to confront the limitations of their material bodies as they have been constructed in reference to sex and to disease must discover paths to pleasure that reimagine the body’s possibilities and refrain from assuming previous notions of what the gay male corpus is capable of experiencing as pleasure. While Hoffman does insist that what his characters are looking to discover is “something safe,” a Foucauldian intercession would suggest that the very notion of what is “safe” for bodies warrants reexamination.

Again, though, As Is achieves a great deal considering its moment in history. The play confronts the medical irresponsibility of many phobic doctors and nurses who gave poor or no treatment to AIDS patients; the play confronts
corners of the gay community which elected to stick their willfully dizzy heads in the sand and ignore the red and rising tide; the play makes an urgent call for a cogent, multi-faceted response to the growing AIDS crisis. But As Is never suggests that gay men asked for the AIDS crisis, and the play certainly never suggests that sexually creative, sexually open gay men deserve a painful disease which will lead to their shameful death. As Is, in 1985, at the height of an AIDS panic in New York City and elsewhere, never suggests that gay sex is the problem.

As Is is not perfect (the play’s incomplete realism is an uneasy mixture, and not as successful that pursuit as Kushner’s Angels in America would be a decade later), nor is William M. Hoffman’s thinking about AIDS. In his introduction to the October 1985 publication of As Is he wrote that despite his fears and anxieties about contracting AIDS himself, “I’m pretty comfortable with people who have AIDS” (xv). Bold for 1985, yes, but nonetheless somewhat troubling in hindsight; the “comfortable” is reassuring—“pretty” is not. But despite this lapse in Hoffman’s judgment, his play is life-affirming, underscoring the right to a full, vital life for all people, regardless of their AIDS infection status. Despite the fact that the play was written amidst ever-mounting death tolls and dire predictions from all sides, As Is never gives in to fear, and never gives up on life, or sex.

The play’s final lines crystallize its standpoint and its strengths. A hospice worker has been caring for a “real queen”, named Jean-Jacques. She says, “I’ve

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5 This line is a paraphrase of a line from Anthony Minghella’s film adaptation of Michael Ondaatje’s The English Patient.
lost some of my idealism...[but] [l]ast night I painted his nails for him...Flaming red. He loved it" (97). Judith Butler’s theories of gender and performativity provide an opening in reading this scene for my purposes. Butler’s considerations of sex and the materiality of the body and how the “regulatory ideals” of sex are iterated and reiterated, materialized and rematerialized—and thus, made potentially unstable—would recognize Jean-Jacques’ crimson nails as a disruption in “the regulation of identificatory practices” (Bodies 3) (italics in original). The willful flouting of gender norms represented by Jean-Jacques’ red-lacquered nails underlines the subversive nature of the moment, even as Butler might question what it would mean to be a “real queen”. The threat that Jean-Jacques’ drag represents is “a critical resource in the struggle to rearticulate the very terms of symbolic legitimacy and intelligibility” (3).

Certainly drag performance can itself be viewed as “elaborate social construct,” a la Bersani, but I would challenge Bersani’s (misogynistic) reading of drag by highlighting the fact that reading drag as necessarily insistent on a kind of feminized man leaves out much of what is disturbing and powerful about drag performance. What is so often striking about drag queens is not only their outré femininity, but also the way in which the feminine trappings underline the

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6 Bersani’s remarks on drag: “The gay male parody of a certain femininity, which, as others have argued, may itself be an elaborate social construct, is both a way of giving vent to the hostility toward women that probably afflicts every male (and which male heterosexuals have of course expressed infinitely nastier and more effective ways) and could also paradoxically be thought of as helping to deconstruct that image for women themselves,” (“Is the Rectum a Grave?” 208) is notable for its reflexive assumption of a native hostility toward women present in the male condition, and its casually heterophobic assertion marking heterosexual men as “infinitely nastier” in their version of misogyny. Bersani implicitly lets himself off the hook, as a gay man, for having a relatively less nasty hostility towards women.
performer’s masculinity. Both femininity and masculinity are present in extreme forms in drag performance (if we take into account normative versions of masculine and feminine installed at the heart of material sexual difference as it functions in the “regulatory ideals” we all know so well), and drag is far more than a “parody of femininity.” While the presence of drag performance destabilizes the same-sex nature of gay sex that Bersani insists on as the foundation of his theories of homo-ness, I believe Jean-Jacques red nails do represent a subversive potential in line with Bersani’s most radical outlaw impulses. It should also be said that Bersani’s deepest outlaw aims share important features with Butler’s dissidence regarding categories of sex, and, moreover, that Bersani’s work could benefit from considering Butler’s rigorous sex- and gender-analysis further, as the two theorists have more shared goals than they would at first seem to.

What Bersani would surely appreciate is that Jean-Jacques, though dying of AIDS, refuses to go quietly or asexually. Up to the last moments of his life he is insisting on the visibility of his sexuality, and on his body’s status as a vessel, an artifact, of sexual desire. Jean-Jacques disrupts the gender binary with drag, and disrupts received notions of people with AIDS with his insistence on his still-active sexual self. The nails are red: the color of blood but also of sexual passion. Further, Bersani misreads drag as fundamentally impeding male desire; Hoffman’s close pairing of Rich and Saul’s sexual journey with Jean-Jacques’ defiant death in drag suggests the positive sexual response that drag might
engender in men, especially as it represents defiance and the continuation of
sicual vitality in the face of death.

“Error bred in the bone…”

*The Normal Heart* takes a decidedly different stance. If *As Is* is colored in
flaming reds, *The Normal Heart* is bone white. As I have already quoted in my
introduction, the play’s wise, no-nonsense Dr. Emma Brookner asks, rhetorically,
“[I]f having sex can kill you, doesn’t anybody with half a brain stop fucking?” (38).

*The Normal Heart* doesn’t believe, like *As Is*, that we might “figure
something out.” No, for Kramer and his play, the errors of sexual desire in gay
culture, and their (for him) resulting toll, are “bred in the bone,” a line from
Auden’s “September 1, 1939,” two stanzas of which Kramer uses as an
epigraph.7

When Kramer wrote *The Normal Heart* he had already written a novel,
*Faggots*, in which he “satirizes” the exploits of gay men bent on sex. And in a
piece on *Faggots* written not long after the novel’s publication in 1980, Robert
Chelsey surmised, “Read anything by Kramer closely, and I think you'll find the
subtext is always: the wages of gay sin are death” (qtd. in Specter 56). If Kramer
was convinced of this as early as 1980, then he very well may have seen the
AIDS crisis as the hard proof he had been waiting for and quite an opportunity to
publicly acknowledge his rightness. *The Normal Heart* was further spurred on by
what Kramer saw as his being ignored by gay men even after the AIDS crisis

7 Unlike Auden, Kramer—and I myself—believe that a poem can change the world.
proved him right; the plot of the play concerns the Kramer character’s dismissal by a gay men’s health group he founded and his persona non grata status among many gay circles.

The play is dramatically effective; it has a particularly poignant speech in which Ned Weeks, the character based on Kramer himself, eloquently delineates the nobility of gay cultural history, making the powerful and I believe correct claim that “The only way we’ll have real pride is when we demand recognition of a culture that isn’t just sexual. It’s all there—all through history we’ve been there; but we have to claim it, and identify who was in it, and articulate what’s in our minds and hearts and all our creative contributions to this earth.” But the problem arises a bit later in the speech when Weeks says, “Being defined by our cocks is literally killing us” (114-115). By refusing, or being unable, to imagine a gay culture in which sexuality and sexual desire are crucial to “what’s in our hearts and minds and all our creative contributions to this earth”—by forming his argument so that hearts and minds on the one hand and “cocks” on the other are two fundamentally opposed and incommensurate aspects of gay life—Kramer makes impossible the empowerment he argues for so passionately. As Bersani illustrates in *Homos*, there is no gayness without gay sex. The category of “gay” disappears once the act of gay sex has been erased, and in that case, Kramer’s argument for liberation is moot. There is no need to respect gay men and their culture if gay men do not exist. And if men cannot speak of and act on their physical desire for men, there is no gayness. Kramer, and the would-be easy moral and sexual choices of his play, denies the kind of searching, grappling,
courageous dialogue that is possible, and was possible even at the terrible time in which *The Normal Heart* was written. The play is to be respected for its savage attempt to save lives that needn’t be lost; the play merits criticism for its implicit assertion, which Kramer would make explicit later, that certain gay men deserve a particular death as a fitting result (punishment) for their sexual lives.

Of course, one can hear Bersani’s vigorous rebuttal in the wings. *The Normal Heart*’s elision of all but the slightest signs of explicit homosexual physical desire is an excellent example of the kind of disturbing, desexualized “self-erasure” that Bersani sees in so much contemporary gay discourse. Kramer’s willingness to bowdlerize homosexuality by omitting sex from the account of what it is to be gay is oddly, frighteningly helped along by the spread of HIV/AIDS and his co-opting of the virus as a political tool to shape public perceptions of male homosexuality. Though he insists that the spread of the virus is a monumental crisis, one cannot help but sense a kind of thankfulness in Kramer’s rhetoric, through the character of Ned Weeks. And though he decries the advent of the virus as a despicable tragedy, Kramer’s real relationship to AIDS is much closer to the parable that activist and writer Douglas Crimp describes so well:

Prior to AIDS, gay men were frivolous pleasure-seekers who shirked the responsibility that comes with normal adulthood—settling down with a mate, raising children, being an upstanding member of society. Gay men only wanted to fuck (and take drugs and stay out all night and dance), and at that to fuck the way naughty teenage boys want to fuck—with anyone
attractive to them, anytime, anywhere, no strings attached. Then came AIDS. AIDS made gay men grow up. They had to find meaning in life beyond the pleasure of the moment. They had to face the fact that fucking has consequences. They had to deal with real life, which means growing old and dying. So they became responsible. And then everyone else accepted gay men. It turns out the only reason gay men were shunned was that they were frivolous pleasure-seekers who shirked responsibility. Thank God for AIDS. AIDS saved gay men. (4-5)

The notion that AIDS will lead to gay male maturity is certainly Kramer’s great gambit. The virus gives him a platform from which to air his personal dissatisfaction with gay culture. The romanticized notion of gayness that he offers from that platform as an “alternative” to the more sex-identified breed of male homosexuality is notable for the fact that it includes not a single openly gay man, not a single man who ever lived as openly, actively homosexual. The catalogue of figures of gay male history that Kramer chooses to populate his list of the valuable contributors to society (who just happened to be gay), stops decades before Stonewall and gay liberation and includes as many men who were filled with self-loathing because of their sexuality as it does men who ever expressed any modicum of pride.

In The Normal Heart, gay men are used as sacrificial figures in order to illustrate that sex leads to death and that homosexuality is acceptable only when it is leached of any bodied desire whatsoever. Kramer’s pseudo-Hellenic reverence for a Platonic homosexual ideal is decidedly marked by the worst of
gay apologist thinking that Bersani writes against. And one must ask—what exactly is a normal heart and how would it act?

“More life”

In his prefatory miscellany to the second part of Angels in America, Perestroika, Tony Kushner indicates his gratitude for Harold Bloom’s translation of the Hebrew word for “blessing” as “more life” (7). That sentiment—the blessing of more life—is crucial to my understanding of Kushner’s epic, and to my understanding of what the play means in reference to Kramer’s work. The radically humane and life-giving properties of Angels in America as a work of literature, a work of art, a work of queer consciousness, have been fundamental to the spiritual and intellectual development and to the exploration of sex and love in late 20th and early 21st century gay culture. Where HIV/AIDS has so often threatened to put an end to various aspects of gay life, Kushner’s epic makes a clear claim that gay life will continue and thrive in the presence of the virus. In Kushner’s reckoning, gay life will grow, expand, deepen, and diversify under the pressures of the virus.

It takes only a glance at the structure and surface of Angels in America to discern its polyglot nature, its diversity of time, place, and point of view.

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8 In Homos Bersani writes of Kramer and his legacy, “Think of all the anti-promiscuous sermonizing by gays in the early years of the AIDS epidemic. If we were dying we only had our loose selves to blame. Even now Larry Kramer is still at it….“ (55). The remarkable willingness many gay men show in shouldering the “blame” for AIDS is representative of the inherent apology these men give for their own sexual desire and the pleasure they experienced on the way to possible infection.

Kushner’s construction of his sprawling six-hour magnum opus in this way allows—and obliges—him to follow the tangle of history through its knots, rather than cut the thread. (Like Wallace Steven’s poem that took the place of a mountain, it is Kushner’s “inexactness” which allows him his discoveries). But it is the forceful felicity\(^{10}\) with which he treats his characters and their bodies that moves viewers most. Dealing with philosophy, intellectual history, theology, and politics, Kushner never fails to ground his play in the body—and Kushner’s bodies are always desiring, always wanting the electric religiosity of sex (examples from the play abound: Harper, Joe, Louis, and even sick and twisted Roy Cohn look to sex or its relative absence as the space of life’s greatest force and power). The inextricable connection between sex and the Angel of History and her visitations’ effect on Prior’s body (her approach and arrival are marked always by a raging erection for Prior) are typical of the kind of bawdy insistence that Kushner never resists; the workings of human history and any deities that may watch over such unfoldings are as much dependent on sex as they are on anything else, perhaps even more than anything else in Kushner’s reckoning. Sexual desire is the fundament of change and human progress in Kushner’s *Angels in America*.

Joe, the young, married Mormon who moves to New York from Salt Lake and comes to understand his own (gay) sexuality thereby, perhaps speaks most eloquently of the sublime sexual moment which in Kushner’s play is figured as

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\(^{10}\) I am grateful for Toni Morrison’s Nobel Lecture, which suggested this phrase to me.
the ground upon which human desire stands, falls, and rises again, new and stronger.

JOE: I pray for God to crush me, break me into little pieces and start all over again....I had a book of Bible stories when I was a kid. There was a picture I’d look at twenty times every day: Jacob wrestles with the angel. I don’t really remember the story, or why the wrestling—just the picture. Jacob is young and very strong. The angel is...a beautiful man, with golden hair and wings, of course. I still dream about it. Many nights. I’m...It’s me. In that struggle. Fierce, and unfair. The angel is not human, and it holds nothing back, so how could anyone human win, what kind of fight is that? It's not just. Losing means your soul thrown down in the dust, your heart torn out from God’s. But you can’t not lose. (49-50)

Kushner makes clear that the losing of which Joe speaks is also gaining, of a kind. That losing means new freedom, which is a terrifying freedom, but freedom nonetheless. The chance to be his authentic self—or perhaps simply the opportunity to discover who that authentic self is or might be—is Joe’s reward for losing the fight. Though Joe does not fully recognize it himself, within his own narrow experience, the larger context of the play as a whole allows the viewer to see that Joe’s losing is what opens him up to the fantastic possibilities of his sexuality. The pain of submitting to the strength of his own sexual self leads Joe to a rebirth. Joe says later in the play, “I try to tighten my heart into a knot, a snarl, I try to learn to live dead, just numb, but then I see someone I want, and it’s
like a nail, like a hot spike right through my chest, and I know I’m losing” (77).

The nail-driven heart, reminiscent of crucifixion imagery (not to mention sexual penetration, the penetrated male), is an image of both pain and mercy. Joe dies to himself as he relinquishes the false image of himself as a heterosexual man, and he is reborn in his own image. As Kushner so vividly dramatizes, sometimes losing the battle is the highest form of redemption and grace, letting go the clearest path to the Divine. Joe’s eventual acceptance of his gay self would seem to be a proof of Bersani’s assertions that reinforcing the gayness of homosexuality (through the body of the penetrated male and it experience of shattering jouissance) provides a kind of liberation that nothing else can. Kushner’s dramatization of Joe’s pained emergence out of the restrictive cocoon of compulsory heterosexuality into a psychological space where he acknowledges and engages his homosexual desire is indicative of Bersani’s assertions that, try as some might, aspects of identity based on desire cannot be dismissed as mere constructions. The discrimination and abjection that results from acting on subversive (homo)sexual desire is lamentable and infuriating, but as Bersani points out, “The consequence of self-erasure is…self-erasure.” Joe wants to succeed in wrestling the angel of his desire into submission, but what he succeeds in doing is creating a life in which his only option, if he wants to be free of homosexual desire, is to “live dead, just numb.” The numbness Joe feels is surely the self-erasure that Bersani remarks upon when he argues so cogently against the “de-gaying” of gayness (Homos 5).
In order to keep living without becoming an automaton, Joe must identify with his desire and pursue it. This causes Joe a loss of certain privileges he was once afforded as an assumed heterosexual member of the American right wing, and these losses, among others, cause Joe pain. In the balance, though, he achieves a kind of freedom. Ironically, perhaps, Joe achieves existential freedom by identifying himself, by allowing himself to be identified as a gay man. In time Joe will perhaps need the critical interventions of a Foucault or Butler in order to free himself from the restrictions of sexual codification and in order to conceive of himself outside the confines of the homosexual/heterosexual dichotomy which stifles so much crucial difference. As Foucault so poignantly asked, “How does it happen that the human subject makes himself into an object of possible knowledge, through what forms of rationality, through what historical necessities, and at what price? My question is this: How much does it cost the subject to be able to tell the truth about itself?” (qtd. in Bodies 93). There is a cost to this truth-telling. But Joe has no hope of reaching the productive possibilities of those critical interventions if he does not first accept the way in which his body experiences pleasures. Sex hurts, sex heals.

Witness the infamous scene in the Rambles (gay cruising ground) of Central Park. This scene more than any other has led to protests, cancelled performances, and morally indignant outcries. Filled with guilt, loneliness, and beset by a kind of gray, existential indecision, Louis has left Prior to be ravaged by the disease that has begun taking a heavy toll on his physical as well as mental health. Louis’ guilt-inspiring, sometimes reprehensible actions are borne
of selfishness, cowardice, and a strange altruism nurtured by his faulty love for Prior. He selfishly goes cruising for sex in the Rambles after he leaves his dying lover, looking for an outlet for his self-punishing inclinations, a chance to perform ritual acts of penitence for his wayward heart. His body becomes a physical vessel for his psychological desire to hurt, as Prior is hurting in Louis' noticeable absence. Louis himself is hurting in the wake of his cowardly exit in the face of Prior's sickness. It is an effort at expiation for his selfish need to look away from the pain Prior is feeling, but he, Louis, cannot control. Louis thus seeks a pain he can (for the moment) control, imploring the stranger in the Rambles, "I want you to fuck me, hurt me, make me bleed….Infect me. I don't care. I don't care" (54, 57), as if the letting of his blood will redeem him for the viral poison in Prior's; as if the risk of taking the virus into his own blood might educate him or change him so that he wouldn't be the kind of person who leaves a lover dying of AIDS.

While this is not bug-chasing per se (because it lacks mindfulness), it is a correlative or incipient gesture that does go some way in establishing grounds for HIV-infection and unprotected sex as psychologically potent acts of will. Louis is attempting, half-consciously, to become infected so that he might be a better lover to Prior. Louis cannot bear sickness or death and so he flees it, and in doing so he also flees the man he loves, the man who loves him. But Louis knows that he could be infected as well, could have been infected just as easily as Prior. And in that case, if he were positive also—what then? Death and illness would be unavoidable; no flight could save him from their progress as the kernel of his death would be then within his own body.
Louis attempts to cauterize the living, breathing wound of his own inadequacy by engaging in the searing, savage act of masochistic sex—sex, again, as both wound and cure; sex as hurting, sex as healing. Butler’s formulation of the body as “that through which” is enormously helpful here. Louis seeks to use his body as a means for psychological transformation, as the material, when acted on by certain forces (sex, disease), through which he might achieve a metamorphosis and attain other possibilities. The physical space of his body becomes the site of a performance of his psychological need to suffer through penitent (and half-consciously desirous) acts. Louis’ thwarted sexual desire for Prior (thwarted by his fear of contracting AIDS from Prior) leads him to a seemingly spontaneous but psychologically orchestrated act of unprotected sex. In this case, the rectum is a stage upon which Louis comes to face his own sexual fears in an attempt to become infected so that he might better be able to love Prior.

*As Is* suggests but does not explore outright the possibility of consciously choosing to have unprotected sex with an infected partner. *Angels in America* senses that there might be circumstances under which such sex acts are intelligible, psychologically resonant and meaningful. Moreover, the treatment of sex in the time of AIDS in both *As Is* and *Angels in America* makes clear that the attendant risks of AIDS and sex are to be countenanced, that the anxieties of sexual risk can be faced in such a way that the resulting choices are various and adaptive rather than singularly right or wrong.
Though neither *As Is* nor *Angels in America* ever dramatizes bug-chasing as such both plays illustrate necessary examples on the path to understanding bug-chasing more deeply. The key element missing from Rich and Saul’s last act journey and Louis’ self-obscured anonymous sex is the keen willfulness and mindful intention which make bug-chasing an act of Heideggerian resoluteness. It is important that bug-chasing is not simply a sex act which is consciously unprotected; bug-chasers accept the lack of protection but they also choose to turn towards their death in the full knowledge that the sex they engage in will almost certainly infect them with the agent of their eventual death. For bug-chasers death is a reality of life they refuse to turn away from. Death is not the opposite of life; death is an *aspect of life* they attempt to engage.

In Kushner’s *Angels in America*, sex and its risks are a blessing—*more life*. In a shared hallucination, lonely, untouched Harper tells sick, lonely Prior that she can see in him an exquisitely beautiful place that is untouched by disease, that there is a truth of his body that disease cannot speak to or drown out: “Deep inside you, there’s a part of you, the most inner part, entirely free of disease. I can see that” (34). I read that moment in the play as an acknowledgment that what is important about Prior is not the disease, but everything that his body still means in spite of the disease—that, quite wonderfully, the disease has thrown into a kind of white-hot Technicolor relief all that is most human and alive about him, making it even more visible. The disease has given him *more life*. 
This is rather more radical an apprehension of sex in the time of AIDS than Kramer has ever attempted to imagine—an apprehension of sex and risk which opens up a profusion of possibilities regarding love, mortality, and corporeality. The possibility that consciously risky sex in the time of AIDS might bring more life is one I take seriously.\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{11} For a comprehensive look at other valuable readings of Kushner’s play see the invaluable \textit{Approaching the Millennium: Essays on Angels in America}, edited by Deborah R. Geis and Steven F. Kruger.
Interlude

You Must Be Hungry

we have said no names

but i am me and he is he

there are names we have them

they have simply remained behind our lips

somewhere in the dark

we are feeling around

for things we cannot see but everything else

smell hear taste touch

things have a shape but no name no names

there are things we want and things we do not want

but who knows

i am me and he is he

we are doing this thing together

it will or won’t make something happen

something doesn’t always happen

are we trying to make something happen

am i letting asking for something to happen

cruising for a bruising some shadowy whisper in the back of my unknowing mind

we are kissing he and me

and my body is growling and i am wanting something and he
says you must be hungry

yes i know i know

...

what feeds it

do you have it
Chapter Two

*Asking for It: A Close Reading of Mark Doty’s “Tiara”*

...what could he do, what could any of us ever do but ask for it?
--Mark Doty, “Tiara”

Whenever politicians and pundits and activists of one stripe or another suggest that HIV positive people have asked for their illness, this is generally a reasonable cause for concern and vociferous disagreement. I myself disagree with those pundits as I do with Larry Kramer’s strident indictment of gay male sexual activity which he regards as tantamount to having “asked for” HIV/AIDS (see introduction and chapter one). The problem with such an opinion is that it holds the sexual desires and habits of certain people—those who have contracted HIV/AIDS—as necessarily different from the rest of the population. Those with HIV/AIDS are more irresponsible, less sane; more careless, less respectable; more licentious, less productive members of society. In the age-old story where sex is sin and the wages of sin are death, HIV/AIDS is the foreseeable comeuppance for those who are black of soul and weak of will, who cannot master their wickedness and so allow their spirits to fall prey to the vagaries of their wayward flesh. We must ask ourselves, though: are HIV positive people examples of human sexual weakness at its logical conclusion, at a far extreme from the remainder of the population? Does the contraction of the HIV virus isolate the afflicted as representatives of what happens when the vice
of sexual license is taken to its extremes? In much religious and conservative social thought this is certainly the case.

And yet, there must be a means of understanding human sexuality which incorporates physical acts of desire into a larger understanding of human activity and elects not to cast sex as sin and sexual illness as the punishment for fleshly weakness, but as a fundamental risk of mortality. After all, what human activity is free from risk? Even acts of piety and religious devotion have at one time or another carried the risk of death for those who practice them. While societal rules and regulations and the philosophies behind them vary with time and place and from person to person within a particular geographical and chronological locus, the existence of sexual desire would seem to be a constant—an aspect of human existence present in (in some form) all places and times, often resisting campaigns aimed at its systemization or eradication. While it is true that much desire is shaped by the realms of power-knowledge which administer subjects so thoroughly, there is always a remainder. That remainder of abjected desire is the most potent germ of human resistance to the range of administration that normative power structures enforce. Abjected desire destabilizes the foundation of regulatory ideals and introduces a fissure into the imposing edifice of subjectification. Desire defies order even as it is one of the fundamental constants of human experience that is shaped by order; even as an act of resistance desire is in fundamental relationship to an idea of order.

Mark Doty is a poet who only came to consider the larger questions of human meaning in the context of sexual desire after the AIDS pandemic made
inroads in his own personal experience. Doty’s partner, Wally’s, slow death from HIV/AIDS led to Doty’s re-evaluation of his aims as a poet.

Before Wally’s diagnosis, lots of my work had been about memory and trying to gain some perspective on the past. Suddenly that was much less important and I felt pushed to pay attention to now, what I could celebrate or discern in the now. In the light of something like that, what you’re doing has to matter. There's no time to fool around. (“Mark Doty”)

In addition to providing Doty a sense of urgency, his experience with AIDS through the illness of friends and lovers also provides his poetry with a greater clarity and visceral impact. Where Doty’s early writing failed to capture much notice or praise, the turn in his oeuvre from abstracted questions of memory and the past toward more concretized, particular questions of sex, love, and death in the time of AIDS led to the renown his work now enjoys. Doty’s 1991 poem “Tiara” is a singularly effective and exquisite example of the poet’s power as a chronicler of life and death as a gay man facing AIDS; in this poem, as Deborah Landau writes, “Doty performs a crucial function in this desolate era not only by providing a record of massive destruction but also by reimagining the terms used to describe such destruction and envisioning possibilities for political, sensual, and spiritual redemption” (194). Doty’s work attempts to reframe the very idea of destruction as it is employed in AIDS discourse, and through his poetry Doty recasts the illness as not only destructive, but also creative. In Doty’s work, AIDS occasions more life, new life, deeper life. While employing familiar language so often employed in AIDS discourse, Doty casts it in new light and
destabilizes our notions of what AIDS does and can do in a life. “Tiara” is the site of a dismantling and reconstruction of the conversation surrounding sex and AIDS, challenging comrades and strangers to re-evaluate the function of desire in a deadly time, and to consider more clearly the lessons of sexual, sensual instincts in the presence of certain risk.

The poem begins with the image of Doty’s friend Peter’s dead body, adorned both flimsily and fabulously: “Peter died in a paper tiara / cut from a book of princess paper dolls” (1-2). Doty foregrounds at the outset both Peter’s vulnerability and his camp fierceness, up to and even in his death (we may be reminded here of the final passage of Hoffman’s *As Is*; see chapter one). Doty refuses to turn away from Peter’s frivolity or his femininity. The princess doll tiara is the jewel of Peter’s drag queen crown, and Doty tells us that Peter “loved royalty, sashes // and jewels” (3-4). The faux gems and real spectacle of Peter’s deathbed glory underline a certain liveliness and vibrancy which traditional notions of the “noble, suffering AIDS victim” fail to represent. Doty further highlights the camp quality of Peter’s personality, even in death:

I don’t know,

he said, when he woke in the hospice,

*I was watching the Bette Davis film festival*

*on Channel 57 and then—* (4-7)

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12 The quotation “noble, suffering AIDS victim” is taken from the gay romantic comedy *The Broken Hearts Club: A Romantic Comedy*, a film which attempts to undercut the demonization/canonization of gay men that occurs in much contemporary art. Either the subject of patronizing tribute or denigrating condemnation, the contemporary gay man in art is rarely allowed to exist in a more human middle ground.
The camp moment turns suddenly still, and the reader might expect a predicted turn to tragedy at this juncture, as the scene shifts from Peter's hospice bed to the wake. But Doty continues to insist on humor.

At the wake, the tension broke
when someone guessed

the casket closed because
he was in there in a big wig
and heels, and someone said

You know he’s always late,
he probably isn’t here yet—
he’s still fixing his makeup (8-15)

The assembled mourners, many presumably gay, some surely sick themselves, find relief (“the tension broke”) in celebrating their dead friend’s treasured minor nuisances and outré flair. In the shadow of death friends turn to reminders of Peter’s overflowing life, the excesses of his personality comforting them.

Here, though, the poem reaches its central turn. In the waning laughter at the wake, “someone said he asked for it. / Asked for it—” (16). At this point the poem speeds into a sudden and resolute refusal of the condemning judgment contained in the flat cruelty of “he asked for it.” The speaker insists rather that “all he did was go down // into the salt tide / of wanting as much as he wanted”
(18-20), the saline veil of a mourner's tears perhaps mirrored in the skin-salt
taste of sexual pleasure, of Peter's "[going] down" into desire. In desire, Peter was
giving himself over so drunk

or stoned it almost didn't matter who,
though they were beautiful,
stampeding into him in the simple
ravishing music of their hurry. (21-25)

Doty's stampeding syntax reflects the ravishing rush of Peter's sexual life,
the musical hurry of many embraces with men he found beautiful. The
disarming, sensual spin of the lines' repeated sibilance ("self", "so", "stoned",
"stampeding", "simple", "ravishing", "music") gives the passage a sound of
repeated whispers and caresses. The tenderness is urgent, though, as desire
often is. Peter's lovers ran ("stampeding") into him, hurried, and though they
were beautiful, as the passage is beautiful, the impact must also have been
rough, bruising, pain accompanying pleasure as a rider bestrides a horse, racing
away in desperate pursuit. Doty underscores the desperation by telling us that
Peter was often "so drunk // or stoned it almost didn't matter who" (21-22) and
that on some level these acts consisted of Peter "giving himself over." His
submission to sexual desire and the assault of pleasure is a reminder of the
primal and needful urgency of eros. Likewise, Peter's drunken, stoned sex acts
are further reminders that Peter's fleeting and anonymous encounters carry
certain risk—the altered state of desire is multiplied by the altered state brought on by drugs and alcohol, and we see that fun, funny Peter was also risky, rash, unwilling to avoid danger. The excesses he was so known for, some of which were so amusing and welcome to those around him, also carry the possibility of discomfort. Peter’s excesses were sometimes funny—and sometimes frightening, when those excesses seemed to be borne of the temptation which might one day take hold of any of us.

The seductive risk of Peter’s sex life is followed by the poem’s speaker interjecting his thoughts: “I think heaven is perfect stasis / poised over the realms of desire” (26-27). It is interesting and telling that directly following the sensual description of Peter’s erotic pursuits, the speaker is compelled to offer his characterization of heaven as a “perfect” equipoise suspended over desire. It would seem that the threat and messiness of Peter’s quick, stoned, bruising embraces strikes the speaker, incites him to view heaven as a vantage point over desire which gives one a perfect balance over the chaotic impulses of the body. The ensuing lines install an ambiguity in the speaker’s position relative to this heaven of stable measures, however.

    I think heaven is perfect stasis
    poised over the realms of desire

    where dreaming and waking men lie
    on the grass while wet horses
    roam among them, huge fragments
of the music we die into
in the body’s paradise. (26-32)

Are the “dreaming and waking men” lying on meadows in a static heaven, or is the speaker imagining himself in this heaven looking down on men who are lying on the earthly stretch of desire? This ambiguity dramatizes the speaker’s desire to speak rapturously about Peter’s desire while not being implicated in that desire himself, to simultaneously feel the pull of that desire but remain able to resist it, looking on from a far, celestial promontory. Further, the figure of the “body’s paradise” also calls into question whether or not this heaven is within or without the body itself. Is this high point over desire within the landscape of the body? Or are heaven and paradise two entirely different locations, splitting or multiplying the possibility of a divine home?

If our bodies contain a paradise, then it shall not be beyond any of us to reach its shores. But if “the body’s paradise” is only the place we may go once the earthly body has passed away (the heaven above), then Peter, or the speaker, may be denied its promise. The speaker knows, as does the reader, that Peter’s risky sex life led to his death—and in the moment where an idea of heaven intrudes into the poem, so does the fear that heaven may be forbidden to those who are trapped in the twisting sheets snapped about by the winds of desire; the fear expressed is that attainment of worldly desire may preclude the attainment of otherworldy desire. In the poem’s strangest figure, though, the “wet horses” roam among the men that are described as “huge fragments // of the
music we die into / in the body’s paradise” (30-32); these horses are metaphoric echoes of the “stampeding” men that ran with and trammed over Peter during his wild days. The ghosts of Peter’s lovers, rejuvenated in this metaphor, suggest that the speaker is, on some level, acknowledging that heaven for him and Peter must bear some relationship to earthly desire, that the two must be connected and not mutually exclusive.

Perhaps most importantly this passage also suggests that there may be something beautiful in the death that leads to this heaven. Death is described as a “music” that we die “into / in the body’s paradise” (31-32). Like the music Orsino hears in the first lines of Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* this music is sad but full of desire; it possesses a “dying fall” (I.i.4); also like Orsino, this music seems to be speaking with a sweet agony about the surfeit of desire and the satiation of appetite, the excesses that we want so much, but know must end in a kind of death. The strains of desire lift and burden those who bear them unto death.

For the speaker, this death leads not to total darkness, however, but a kind of waking drowse in this strange heaven:

Sometimes we wake not knowing

how we came to lie here,

or who has crowned us with these temporary

13 “If music be the food of love, play on;
Give me excess of it, that, surfeiting,
The appetite may sicken, and so die.
That strain again! it had a dying fall…”
precious stones. (33-36)

Like the flimsy paper gems of Peter’s tiara, the gifts given to us by our various lovers are fleeting, and we may not know who is responsible for the gift of a particular stone. The path that leads from lust to touch to pleasure onward eventually to satiety and death is not straightforward; provenance unknown, the jewels in our crown are “precious” nonetheless. Whatever anxiety Peter’s death has caused the speaker, he is still unwilling to deny the pull of Peter’s life, and clearly acknowledges what he imagines to be the queer beauty of Peter’s experiences. As Landau writes, the speaker is “claiming irreducible grace” (213) for Peter’s rampant life.

This grace is taken to an exquisite level in the poem’s final lines:

….And given

the world's perfectly turned shoulders,
the deep hollows blued by longing,
given the irreplaceable silk

of horses rippling in orchards,
fruit thundering and chiming down,
given the ordinary marvels of form

and gravity, what could he do,
what could any of us ever do
but ask for it? (36-45)
The world itself is beautiful, and its “perfectly turned shoulders” are a kind of proof to the speaker that the world is meant to inspire us to seek beauty; the “perfect” turn of those shoulders could not be an accident. The “deep hollows blued by longing” suggest the melancholy quality of the desire we are stricken by in the presence of a human beauty and reminds us of the bruising stampede of Peter’s life. And the “silk” of the “horses rippling in orchards” is “irreplaceable”—if we turn away from the seductive plaint of those horses, those turned shoulders, they will not come again. The speaker is aware that the supply of beautiful moments with which to engage our desire is not endless; the “fruit” which is “thundering and chiming down” like the colorful notes of a sonorous, tolling bell, will reach an end. The “music… [of] the body’s paradise” will end, and will not come again. The “ordinary marvels” of our human existence are not to be stored away for another day, a longer, safer day. The “form and gravity”, the shape and weight of our lives, is not exchangeable. The speaker then arrives at his conclusion, his response to the notion that Peter “asked for” his death from AIDS—“what could he do, / what could any of us ever do / but ask for it?” (44-45).

Mark Doty has said of this poem, “‘Tiara’ is an elegy for a friend of mine who was a drag queen, always out in clubs….After he died someone said at his wake, ‘Well, he asked for it.’ I was filled with rage at that ridiculous notion that we invite our own oppression as a consequence of pleasure.” His response in the poem was to attempt a “redemptive re-evaluation or revisioning. To say, well, there is a way in which we ask for it! We love the world! We want to have sex! We desire beauty! We love whatever it is that we love” (Landau 210). The
crucial difference which we should be careful note, then, between Doty’s “redemptive re-evaluation” of the question “Did he ask for it?” and Larry Kramer’s vitriolic insistence that gay men asked for AIDS, is that Doty discovers a shared human culpability in which we all ask for death by embracing life. In Kramer’s (and Jerry Falwell’s, and so many others’) condemnations there is blame, the belief that death is a punishment deserved for sin or sickness. In Doty’s reckoning death is not a punishment, and what we are asking for is no more and no less than the chance to do with our lives what we may, and pay the price exacted from all of us in time.

In her analysis of Doty’s poem Deborah Landau writes that “Doty rejects the link between love and death and challenges narratives that portray homoerotic love as self-destructive” (210). It is closer to the truth that Doty rejects the idea that death is punishment for love, and challenges the narratives that insist homoerotic love is merely self-destructive, or any more self-destructive than heterosexual love. To be sure, there is a self-destructive component to any life and love, which has been well-documented in literature. The fate of star-crossed Romeo and Juliet has been lamented for centuries—and only the hardest heart could hear their youthful paeans to one another and believe the two would be better off choosing a lesser life over their pained deaths. And surely none could condemn Sydney Carton or deny his redemptive and beautiful choice as epitomized in the final words of Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*.

The fact is that humans have been dying for desire and love since time began—we have always been asking for it, if only in our refusal to stop living in
order to avoid dying. The fragile paper tiara placed on Peter’s ravaged head in Doty’s poem is the delicate crown of mortality that is placed on all our brows at birth.

Landau states that Doty’s AIDS poetry and “Tiara” in particular asserts the “regenerating power of the erotic” and is interested in “affirming sexuality despite—and in the midst of—risk” (213); like Kushner’s *Angels in America*, the spirituality communicated in “Tiara” is “healing, redemptive, libidinous, and visionary” (214). These readings are apt, and highlight the central power of the poem. Though gay men have often been, and remain today, popular scapegoats receiving castigation for taking sexual risks, these risks are shared by us all.
Interlude

Severance/Suture

a beard growing in darkly

a close-shave haircut

a finger hooked over a long dark brown cigar

i bought the cutter you used

a spilling of knives

on the floor of my mind

nicknames and real names and one name

i was waiting to say

to speak through my crushed mouth

underneath god’s open eye

in the ceiling

a spilling of knives

tumbles down on my back

minty tobacco and a true cruelty

and a wild aimed fist on the bone of my eye

my mouth unbuttoned

my eyes unblind

a spilling of knives
on the floor of my mind

my blood tastes different when you do it

i think i feel

who i am now
I have come to believe that a small percentage of men do want to become infected with HIV. On the spectrum of barebacking, they are the most worrisome to me because this choice seems blatantly self-destructive. (Shernoff 164)

He asked who had infected me; and I told him that, without remembering any particular incident of unsafe sex, I didn’t really know….It could have been anyone. “Anyone?” he asked, incredulously. “How many people did you sleep with, for God’s sake?” Too many, God knows. Too many for meaning and dignity to be given to every one; too many for love to be present in each…. (Sullivan 41)

The two above quotes exemplify the two most typical, comfortable responses to bug-chasing. The first, taken from Michael Shernoff’s *Without Condoms: Unprotected Sex, Gay Men, and Barebacking* is based on a pop-psych platitude which chooses to read bug-chasers as merely intent on achieving their own demise. The second, taken from prominent gay conservative Andrew
Sullivan’s memoir *Love Undetectable: Notes on Friendship, Sex, and Survival*, details Sullivan’s own self-effacing admission of irresponsibility and shameful sexual caprice. Sullivan’s investment in advancing the aims of conservative ideology is well-documented, and his willingness to use his own HIV status as a tool for his own political goals (not at all unlike Larry Kramer’s self-serving employment of AIDS as a political device) should color the way in which we read his confession.

Grains of salt aside, however, Shernoff and Sullivan represent the fearful reactions to bug-chasing that have been communicated in public discussions of the phenomenon. Since the publication of the first widely available article on bug-chasing in *Rolling Stone* in 2002, debate has raged about the prevalence of bug-chasing in the gay population, and what percentage of new infections bug-chasing may account for. Since *Rolling Stone’s* initial response was revealed to be a gross overestimate (a misreport on the part of the article’s author), most sources agree that the number of gay men who engage in bug-chasing is very small (“UPDATE”).

Though much has been wrong or misleading about the public discourse surrounding bug-chasing, credit must be given to those who are attempting to understand this exceptional trend. Though Shernoff’s book is filled with a lamentably pat analysis of barebacking in the gay male population, he does make some attempt at including the voices of barebackers and bug-chasers whose self-reports do not fit into categories of self-destruction or irresponsibility. Though he undercuts the honesty of these statements with his own shocked
admonitions and nervous neutralizations, Shernoff does report one subject’s words: when asked how he felt after having intentionally sought out and contracted HIV, the subject replies, “Maybe now that I’m HIV-positive, I can finally have my life” (164).

The subject frames his conversion as a possible act of possession—not only of the virus, but of his life. The language of self-possession is striking here, and it echoes the language of Martin Heidegger’s theory of being-towards-death. Heidegger says of being-towards-death that it is not an isolation that flees the world, but brings to us, freed from illusions, into the resoluteness of “action”. This resoluteness that runs ahead does not spring from excessive “idealistic” demands that soar above existence and its possibilities, but springs from the sober understanding of the fundamental possibilities that Da-sein possesses actually. With the sober dread that brings us face to face with one’s being-able-to-be by oneself, joy, arrayed in strength, goes hand in hand. In it Da-sein is freed from the “accidents” of being entertained that busy curiosity provides for itself from the happenings around the world. (qtd. in Schmitt 184)

The “resoluteness” that Heidegger speaks of in this turn toward the “fundamental possibilities” of existence and the authentic action that might arise from awareness of those possibilities is characteristic of bug-chasers who seek to own the possibilities of their lives, even as those possibilities include their end.

Heidegger makes clear that the view of death as a factual end to existence, a biological terminus, holds no potential for Da-sein to own his life.
Magda King, in her guide to *Being and Time*, writes that Heidegger concludes that

Da-sein cannot be made into a whole by having an end tacked on to his existence in death, but…his being is in itself a being-toward-an-end, as soon as and as long as Da-sein is, he already exists in and from the disclosed possibility of the end of his existence, to which he relates himself in this or that definite way. (121)

Again, then, being-towards-death is not an act of immediate suicide or a willful cessation of existence. Being-towards-death involves, rather, a turning towards death in the midst of life as an always-already present possibility from which life can never be separate. Owning death fully in life is the challenge for Da-sein in being-towards-death. This is necessary because “Da-sein falls away from himself by fleeing from a threat that constantly pursues him. Owned existence, therefore, must lie in a resolute turning toward the threat that overtly or covertly determines Da-sein’s being” (emphasis in original) (King 143). The human tendency to avoid thoughts of death or to attempt to control thoughts of death through social management (funerary rites and regulations of state or religion) keeps Da-sein from owning his existence fully. Similarly, accounts of bug-chasing which describe the underlying motivation of the act as pursuing control of sickness and death through a willful infection neglect the possibility that bug-chasing may be of a far more powerful nature. Chasers who do not seek to merely control the factual dictates of illness and expiration, but rather are interested in a more complete ownership of their existence beyond the petty
confines of the they-self, are enacting the kind of turn towards an end that Heidegger describes.

The they-self tendencies are decimated by the authentic being-towards-death and its anticipation of ultimate possibility. This anticipation “discloses to existence that its uttermost possibility lies in giving itself up, and thus it shatters one’s tenaciousness to whatever existence one has reached” (Heidegger 308). This is crucial in order to have an understanding of bug-chasing that is not motivated by fear. The common and persistent fear of mortality, terror of death and dying, and terror of those who are unafraid of their own death and dying, is characteristic of the they-self which is clinging to an existence that is lifeless. As for Joe Pitt in Kushner’s *Angels in America*, there is a kind of dying to oneself that is necessary in order to live as oneself; the misguided they-self clings to an existence that is not even his, as it is inherently inauthentic.

The open-ended but certain and conscious attention paid to coming death by those who engage in bug-chasing is, in this reckoning, a deeper knowing of existential finitude, and this knowing brings Da-sein to his self-owned existence in the turning toward the threat which constantly pursues him (King 157). For Heidegger, death is not an external occurrence, an empirical fact which is *out there* in the world bringing about the end of existence; no, for Heidegger death is *in existence*, within life, a “present reality” which stretches out towards all the possibilities of existence.

King states further that “since the power of death belongs to Da-sein itself as its most authentic possibility, freedom takes the form of moving always in the
direction of death, or of always choosing to be towards our own end. For this reason, Heidegger describes Da-sein’s existence as FREEDOM TOWARDS DEATH, a phrase printed in exaggerated typeface in Being and Time" (424-425). The freedom towards death mirrors the freedom that bug-chasers experience as they eschew fear of their mortality and choose an existence in which they own the always present possibility of their own death.

Analyzing being-towards-death, Richard Schmitt states that one gets the sense of the man who faces dying squarely as one who is in full possession of himself, who can by virtue of this act wholeheartedly, held back neither by unrealistic projects, by fear or weakness, nor by excessive subservience to conventional demands and standards. Such a person is a joyful and strong individual; he needs no diversions to protect him from despair and anxiety; clear-eyed, he sees the world for what it is and accepts it. (184)

This reading characterizes, to my mind, the authentic possibilities of bug-chasing. Rather than choose to read the act as deviant sexual activity or maladjusted psychological self-destructiveness (either of which would propagate the kind of normative and narrow understanding which has plagued so much sexual and psychological discourse), I believe that it is possible to read bug-chasing in the context of Heidegger’s being-towards-death.

In the moment in time in which we find ourselves—in which doom and dread are perhaps more persistent companions than ever before in the known world—it is a crucial question: death and what it means. The medical industry is
prolonging lives but not the health or happiness of those lives. Hordes of believers set store by the promise of another world to come, a later world in which glory will be bestowed, marking here and now as the lesser and finally unimportant world. And yet death is still the enemy out there, ruining lives which supposedly are but brief stop-overs on the way to a better place.

We cannot know of the existence a better world, though so many dress guesses up in the clothes of certain knowledge. But this world, now, and ourselves in this world, we have better chance of knowing. Our deaths are more certain and fraught than ever, and yet for most, death is still out there, an end to be arrived at which only precludes further life and finalizes existence, but does not endow that existence with anything other than a period at the end of its sentence. Now is the time to rewrite the sentence and perhaps make more of the less time we are about to have, make more of the end of the world which is always-already a kernel of happening in our existence.

When gay men strip themselves of the slender but tenacious protections insisted on by those arbiters of life and the pursuit of happiness (as the privileged conspire to characterize it) and allow their bodies to consume death, seek disease to consume their bodies, they are refusing the notion of external death which is out of their hands and is definite but inexplicable. Bug-chasers turn towards the always-already present possibility of death, and in so doing appreciate their own being more deeply than a disavowal of death could ever permit. The grave, the garden, that is the gay body, opens to the world in the most taboo fashion by way of the rectum, brings death into the present moment
even as it stretches toward a future where death transpires, refiguring existence and marking the present with the future, acknowledging the ecstatic contradiction of life in death. The life in death is one that is owned by the subject and can be owned by no other; the life thrown into exquisite relief by death marks the importance of one’s own existence to one’s self, and underlines the final and singular actualization of life, which can be owned only by the subject of the life now ending.

Bug-chasing is ownership of one’s death in such a way that the life too is more owned, and the days of that life are more free and aware. This is not suicide which runs from life only to end it as quickly as possible; this is a means of death which engenders deeper knowing and grasp of the life one has lived and will live and is not-yet ended. This sounds pretty, perhaps, but is brutal, and terrible, but has beauty in the way that so much that is terrible has beauty.
Conclusion

On A Bathroom Wall

In yellow neon marker— filthy faggot bitches.

In gray pencil scrawl— the only good faggot is a dead faggot.

In black ink darkened— Another
Infected
Dick
Sucker.

In bloodred dripping sign— kill faggots.

In cursive fine lines— God hates faggots.

In blue metal scratches— what looks good in orange and red?
a faggot on fire

where are the matches?
BIBLIOGRAPHY


VITA

William Dustin Parrott was born in Dayton, TN on June 26, 1982. He was raised in Soddy-Daisy, TN where he graduated from Soddy-Daisy High School in 2000. Dustin attained concurrent Bachelor of Arts degrees in English and Psychology from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville in 2005.