Kinship as a Strategy for Living: Screening the Queer "Family"

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ABSTRACT

The evolving representations of queer people in moving images have taken the form of a homecoming, especially in light of recent law changes that pertain to same-sex marriage in the United States, and the media's concurrent readiness to recast sexual minorities in the roles of husbands, wives, fathers, mothers and children. The queers' cinematic and televisual journey from periphery to center has effectively become a journey back to the privileges and comforts of familial life, and a domesticity that remains at the core of American culture.

In light of this transition, this thesis seeks to explore the presence of kinship in queer urban communities in the period from the 1970s to the 1990s. While the queer cultural output of this period seeks to establish the queer identity independent of, or in opposition to, heteronormativity, the idea of family is absorbed and transformed as part of a larger community-building process. In the queer milieu, family is appropriated, emulated and enacted as much as it is escaped, negotiated and subverted. In order to demonstrate the diversity of the queer "family," this study engages with three major filmic case studies –*The Boys in the Band* (dir. William Friedkin, 1970), *Parting Glances* (dir. Bill Sherwood, 1986) and *Paris Is Burning* (dir. Jennie Livingston, 1990). These films are analyzed for their capacity to give shape to queer kinship as conceptualized in queer theory, film theory, queer history and criticism, psychoanalysis, and dramatic theories. Through these filmic case studies, the queer "family" is located and investigated in three distinct contexts – that of American family drama, the AIDS epidemic and performance documentary.

Dedicated to:

My parents and my "family."

Special Thanks:

Thomas Waugh, my mentor and the ultimate House Mother.

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Introduction

Before *Modern Families* and Fag Hags

"A certificate on paper isn't gonna solve it all, but it's a damn good place to start." So goes the hip-hop anthem "Same Love" by the hip-hop duo Macklemore & Ryan Lewis and singer Mary Lambert, performed to great fanfare at the 56th Grammy Awards in January of 2014. As part of the rousing performance, Macklemore and Lambert were joined on the stage by fellow musicians Queen Latifah and Madonna, who then proceeded to officiate a televised mass wedding of 34 couples in attendance, both gay and straight. The title of a Rolling Stone magazine article covering the performance, "Macklemore, Queen Latifah Turn 'Same Love' into Mass Grammy Wedding," inadvertently points to a standard of contemporary media according to which the struggles around "same love," or the human and political rights of the LGBT community, are regularly interpreted as the right to marry.

Looking at the landscape of contemporary popular media, it becomes apparent that queerness has largely been recast within the familial and marital contexts for the purposes of mass consumption. Television shows such as *Desperate Housewives*, *The New Normal* and *Modern Family* have worked hard to cement the image of domesticated queer couples within popular culture, and specifically within the traditionally family-friendly and family-oriented genres of soap opera and situation comedy. The positive image of a sexual minority seems to have become that of a same-sex couple, raising a child in the suburbs. In his seminal book, *The Trouble with Normal*, social theorist Michael Warner investigates the assumed centrality of gay marriage within the larger queer argument from a political and ideological standpoint. Stating that "[marriage] became the dominant issue in lesbian and gay politics of the 1990s, but not before" (Warner 87), he explores a gap perceived in the centrality of gay marriage since the 1990s as opposed to the gay movements from the 1970s onward. The same shift is observed by Judith Stacey, a scholar invested in rethinking the concepts of family and marriage, particularly when it comes to the inherent issues of gender and sexuality. In her article titled "Gay and Lesbian Families: Queer Like Us," she posits that,

> The grass roots movement for gay liberation of the late 1960s and early 1970s struggled along with the militant feminist movement of that period to liberate gays and women *from* perceived evils and injustices represented by "the family," rather than *for* access to its blessings and privileges. (Stacey 480)

The strides towards obtaining the "blessings and privileges" that marriage provides suggest emulation and assimilation into heteronormativity, an adjustment that is easily observable in today's media-prescribed representations of acceptable queerness that work to legitimize the gay and lesbian experience through marital visibility. This kind of legitimization also calls into question the ethics of legal and other benefits that seem exclusive to marriage. Moreover, the overwhelming focus on queerness as something that needs to be reconfigured into a familial structure implies a risk for the queer histories honored and remembered outside of nuptial parameters. In her essay "Against Equality, Against Marriage: An Introduction," published in a collection of radical queer writings titled *Against Equality: Queer Revolution, Not Mere Inclusion*, edited by Ryan Conrad, Yasmin Nair writes in agreement with Stacey when she notes that contemporary media "[dismisses] the complexity of gay history" and remains purposefully blind to the fact that "much of gay liberation was founded on leftist and feminist principles, which included a strong materialist critique of marriage" (Nair 16). Her essay criticizes marriage and family as conduits for perpetuating capitalism, and takes particular issue with the idea of the normative family "as an arbiter of benefits" (19), and particularly the contemporary reliance on this structure, which "[allows] the state to mandate that only some relationships and some forms of social networks count" (20). As outlined in the preface to this anthology, this body of work challenges what the authors dub "the holy trinity of mainstream gay and lesbian politics: gay marriage, gays in the military, and hate crime legislation" (Conrad et al. 6), with the purpose of re-examining "a gay agenda which has actively erased radical queer history into a narrative of progress, one where gays and lesbians flock towards marriage, military service, hate crime legislation, and the prison industrial complex" (4).

Observing cultural documents from the late twentieth and the twenty-first century, it is not hard to notice how the family has become the central issue and theme of gay discourse. In *The Trouble With Normal*, Warner writes that "[to] read the pages of *The Advocate* or *Out* is to receive the impression that gay people hardly care about anything else" (85). Indeed, the vast majority of a random issue of *The Advocate*, published on February 29, 2000, deals explicitly with the issue of gay marriage, with other stories arguing for gay acceptance and visibility within heteronormative institutions such as Boy Scouts, or advocating committed relationships as a favorable lifestyle. For example, a review of a documentary on the relationship of cabaret songwriter and performer John Wallowitch and his partner, dancer Bertram Ross, opens with a plea to "Generation Q" to remember that "there *is* such a thing as a long-term, committed gay couple in show-biz" (Ferber 59). In an opinion piece titled "What Marriage Means," written in response to Vermont's contemporaneous supreme court interpretations of the institution of marriage in light of gay and lesbian rights, E.J. Graff argues for the flexibility of marriage by invoking historical moments when the definition and meaning of marriage was in flux, from 19th century discourses on divorce and interracial couplings, to contemporary linguistic problems defining the institution as exclusive to heterosexual couples. She concludes with a telling statement,

> But define marriage as a commitment to live up to the rigorous demands of love, to care for each other as best as you humanly can, and all these possibilities – divorce, contraception, feminism, marriage between two women or two men – are necessary, even inevitable. Depending on what happens in Montpelier, Madeline and I may soon be the boring old married ladies my cousin already thinks we are – not just in life but in law. (Graff 48)

I am not discussing *The Advocate* in order to dismiss the gay community's focus on marriage as a right, nor to merely illustrate Warner's claim of the centrality of marriage in the discourse of gay life from the 1990s onward. Rather, I am mentioning the institution of marriage as well as recent instances of the legitimization of gay family structures in law and the media in order to draw focus towards the concern for families in American life as a point of entry into the discussion of queer kinship and conjugality in the more volatile, seemingly "anti-family" decades of the 1970s and 1980s. In light of the legislative and logistic privileges of familial life as defined by the marital bond and the assumption of an easily negotiable and digestible monogamous, straight-looking relationship, I am interested in examining the ways in which the institution of family has been conceptualized in American culture and to follow its footprints back to 1970s and 1980s queer communities, where I expect to not only uncover attitudes that anticipate the late-20th and 21st century focus on marriage and family, but also ways in which the "familial" has been emulated, appropriated and transcended in an age where it was not as widely available as it is today.

I would be remiss not to preempt the remainder of my theoretical and filmic overview situated in the 1970s and 1980s with an acknowledgment of a specific cinematic trend that characterized the 1990s and early 2000s and intersected the queer and the familial in an influential way, ushering in the present era of gay visibility in the media within a specifically domestic context. In my engagement with the issue of *The Advocate* that I have discussed, I have come across a full-page advertisement for *The Next Best Thing*, a dramedy starring Madonna and Rupert Everett. The 2000 film, by gay director John Schlesinger, is about a straight woman anxious about her single status and a ticking biological clock, and her charming gay best friend, who she drunkenly beds and decides to live with after the intercourse results in a child. The film is indicative of a larger cinematic trend that centered on women, typically presented as neurotic and desperate, and their gay best friends whose male companionship serves as a stand-in for a relationship until the women are coupled or married. Other examples of this trend include *My Best Friend's Wedding* (dir. P.J. Hogan, 1997) and *The Object of My Affection* (dir. Nicholas Hytner, 1998), as well as the influential television sitcom *Will & Grace* (1998-2006). In his analysis of *Will & Grace* in the book *Queer (Un)Friendly Film and Television*, James R. Keller claims that the sitcom, with its two gay characters comprising half of the main cast, "negotiates with the dominant culture by making the most important relationships in the lives of the two gay characters heterosocial and quasi-heterosexual" (124). The quasi-heterosexuality is realized through the gay characters' close relationship with their straight female friends, the titular character particularly in line with other such characters in the cinematic output of this kind. Eric McCormack's interpretation of Will, "masculine without machismo and with only a hint of camp" (Keller 124), is comparable to Rupert Everett's performance in both *My Best Friend's Wedding* and *The Next Best Thing*, or that of Paul Rudd in *The Object of My Affection*, creating more than just a new gay archetype that is allowed to perform as masculine. In effect, this cinematic and televisual trend rethinks gay characters for a familial setting through emulation of traditional gender roles, working to carve out a space in popular culture where gay men can be seen and valued by performing the roles of quasi-boyfriends and surrogate fathers.[1]

In his study titled *Family, Drama, and American Dreams*, Tom Scanlan argues that "the family situation is the crucial subject of American drama," the examination of which is in fact a study of "a habit of mind, a pattern of values and ideology" (3). Even though Scanlan's 1978 book does not address queer life, the argument that family as a unit and an ideology is central to American identity, as communicated through its dramatic output, is a crucial entry point into the queer cinematic canon, especially in light of today's insistence of framing gay subjectivity within the familial framework. In fact, Scanlan identifies the main problem of twentieth-century drama, "[from] O'Neill on," as "family life strained by the conflicting tensions of security and freedom, mutuality and selfhood" (49). The pertinent question at hand is how this tension, originating in the family environment and flooding American culture, has been reproduced and negotiated in the queer cultural canon, as queer subjects could not simply be exempt from the ostensible centrality of the familial in the national culture only due to simple inability to marry and form "legitimate" families of their own.

R. D. Laing, noted psychologist and Scanlan's contemporary, wrote extensively and influentially on family relationships, and in his article, "The Family and the 'Family,'" published in 1971 as part of the anthology titled *The Politics of the Family and Other Essays*, made a key distinction between family of origin, or a family's observable structures and elements, and the internalized family (alternatively distinguished by quotation marks), or an acquired understanding of a family's elements and their relationships and operations (Laing 4). This "family" is a fantasy structure constructed on a necessary sense of peer similarity between its participants, rooted in a common *we* and a common *them.* Laing explains this commonality is part of the process of internalization – the mapping of "'outer' onto 'inner,'" (7) or differently put, the perception of a set of relations and objects as "patterns of relationship" (8). The centrality of familial life that both Laing and Scanlan note is then perpetuated by the process of transference, "of a group of relations constituting a set […] from one modality of experience to others" (Laing 7), through which a "family," this psychologically internalized version of one's family, is projected onto another mode of sociality.

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[1] It should be pointed out that my reading of this televisual and cinematic output, and of *Will & Grace* specifically, is limited to the argument made here, as well as the scope of this thesis. For a more nuanced and affirmative reading of the sitcom, especially as it pertains to community formation amongst characters as well as spectators, I recommend Christopher Reed and Christopher Castiglia's chapter "The Revolution Might Be Televised" in their book, *If Memory Serves: Gay Men, Aids, and the Promise of the Queer Past.*

To look at the evolution of queer familial life, and specifically the queer cinematic canon, *vis-à-vis* Laing, means to look at a long process of transference, marked on the one hand by queer struggle and the inability to partake in familial life and, by extension, American citizenship, and on the other hand the cultural output that negotiated the queers' "outsider" status through codification and reevaluation of the family itself. The televised matrimony of same-sex couples at the Grammys, then, is another in a longer and longer process of redefining what "family" can mean, just like the presence of quasi-boyfriends and surrogate fathers in mainstream cinema and television of the 1990s and early 2000s is a transference of the culturally accepted understanding of the family onto gay bodies that suddenly become legitimized. What came before the gay family as the political bottom line, and gay best friends as coded heterosexual boyfriends, has certainly been affected by the centrality of family as a social structure and a factor of identity formation. Thus, to uncover the familial within the queer with a consciousness of today's assimilation of queerness into the familial is to hopefully uncover a different way of relating – an intimacy and a kinship that challenges and subverts as much as it emulates and compromises.

To this end, the cinematic corpus of this thesis consists of three feature films that have significant queer artistic input and that enclose and relate to the idea of "family" in diverse ways. William Friedkin's modern classic, *The Boys in the Band* (1970), already exhibits certain tropes of family drama, emulating and lampooning depictions of marital life while its characters devour each other in a makeshift therapy session that works to uncover their collective familial trauma and their place in the gay milieu. Bill Sherwood's *Parting Glances* (1986) follows the same trend into the following decade, with the specter of AIDS now adding a purpose and a finitude to queer kinship. The intersection of queer relationality and AIDS will especially be investigated in relation to Tom Roach's writing on Foucault, AIDS and the potentiality of queer friendship. Finally, Jennie Livingston's 1990 documentary *Paris Is Burning*, filmed during the latter half of the 1980s, will be traced for instances of queer kinship and relationality specifically in regards to familial nomenclature and performance. Working from these distinct perspectives (American family drama, AIDS and performance documentary), and referring to a number of other works that make up this particular slice of the queer canon along the way, I hope to demonstrate not only that kinship has been a staple of the queer cinematic output across decades and genres, but also that queer internalization of these preoccupations is no mere emulation of a social landscape conditioned to think in terms of the familial and domestic. Rather, the intersection of the queer and the familial, especially when framed by the cinematic, becomes a force that empowers the constituents of these urban, chosen families. Moreover, these narratives of queer kinships work to disrupt and critically engage with the family's traditionally ascribed influence and authority.

While my three case studies, along with the majority of other films that I will refer to, are all set in New York City, this thesis does not seek to explore the implicit connection between queer kinship and city films. While the city is an obvious location where diverse relationships can develop, the scope of this thesis cannot accommodate the breadth of urban studies and the study of city films that this connection implies. On the other hand, the centrality of New York City to the filmic corpus of the thesis makes the case studies more harmonious and cohesive, while helpfully limiting the scope of my discussion of queer families to a particular location and body of work.

My main methodology in investigating the formation of queer "families" is narrative analysis, with occasional elements of film analysis that pertain to the films' staging, stylistic choices or the visual and audio effects. The films chosen reflect and expand this central problem, while at the same time functioning as case studies for the various writings done on the question of family. This body of literature is too large to go over fully, but for the purposes of a literature review, I will selectively list works that have greatly contributed in the writing of this thesis. Film theory and criticism form a major framework, including Vito Russo's *The Celluloid Closet* as a master narrative of queer film criticism, along with more formal film theorizations including Susan Hayward and Thomas Waugh's writings on melodrama, and Lucas Hilderbrand's recent book on *Paris Is Burning* that approaches the film from the framework of film history and criticism. Film criticism is also drawn from John Loughery's *The Other Side of Silence* and Rodger Streitmatter's *From "Perverts" to "Fab Five": The Media's Changing Depiction of Gay Men and Lesbians*, along with numerous other journal articles and book chapters. The field of queer theory is another major influence, with Tom Roach's *Friendship as a Way of Life* forming the backbone of my understanding of queer friendship and relationality vis-à-vis the interview of the same name Foucault gave in 1981. Selections from other works, such as the collection *Against Equality*, edited by Ryan Conrad, or Monica B. Pearl's *AIDS Literature and Gay Identity: The Literature of Loss*, contribute to the intersection of queer and familial life in diverse and interesting ways. Roach and Pearl's books, along with Waugh's article "Erotic Self-Images in the Gay Male AIDS Melodrama" form my theoretical framework when it comes to looking at AIDS and the ways in which the epidemic encompasses the idea of "family."

In turn, Tom Scanlan's overview of the centrality of family in American drama in his study *Family, Drama and American Dreams*, along with R.D. Laing's psychoanalytic theorization of the internalized family in his article "The Family and the 'Family,'" make up the theoretical framework for looking into the family as a social and cultural construct. In light of this diverse body of literature, the filmic case studies work to put the different aspects of queer identity and familial life into dialogue. Finally, Brian Currid's essay, "'We Are Family:' House Music and Queer Performativity," and David Halperin's book *How to Be Gay,* intersect queer theory and popular culture, the latter of which becomes an opportune point of entry into the formation of queer families in its reproduction of family dynamics and signifiers. In the context of the documentary *Paris Is Burning*, sociological and historical literature on extended kinship networks among people of color is also consulted. Through my film analysis, I aim to fill a gap in the constellation of these different subliteratures that pertains to my central question – the critical, discursive and destabilizing possibilities that emerge from the internalization of the familial by its supposed opposite, the queer.

Chapter One

The Boys in the Band:

Family Trauma, Queer Relationality and Dinner Parties

The overwhelming attitude towards *The Boys in the Band*, Mart Crowley's 1968 play and, more specifically (for reasons that undoubtedly have to do with access more than the adaptation itself) to the 1970 film version, directed by William Friedkin, has been that of disdain. While the quality of the performances by the original Broadway cast, reprising their roles from the stage production on celluloid, remains undisputed, the film's growing incompatibility with audiences that became more and more demanding and intolerant of the way it frames its gay characters as the years went by, requires that it be seen and carefully negotiated as a historical artifact of sorts. To research *The Boys in the Band* today is to repeatedly encounter condescension and derision, save for almost perfunctory mentions of the film's status as one of the early major American motion pictures specifically about gay people.

The film, with its campy opening montage set to the tune of "Anything Goes" from the musical of the same name, and following some of the main characters traversing boutiques, bookstores and gay bars of Manhattan, extends the location of the original text, but only briefly, since (with the exception of a brief piece of dialogue) the action is confined to an apartment, as is the case in the original text. The opening montage is a crucial departure from the stage play, as this little piece of *flânerie* sets up the proceedings within the larger, familiar context of New York City before moving the characters into a confined space where their shared sexual orientation is put to the forefront. It is this unflinching exhibition of "gayness," underscored in the film by the contrast between the characters' relative inconspicuousness in the opening montage set on the streets of New York and their abandon once they come together in a private space, that demarcates *The Boys in the Band* in most of the literature that discusses it. Because of this display of gayness, laced with and often defined by limp wrists and sexual innuendo, the film is approached almost universally as a didactic text on homosexuality rather than a more complex dramatic piece. In his book *From "Perverts" to "Fab Five,"* Rodger Streitmatter assumes this attitude overwhelmingly, his entry points into the film made up of negative stereotypes about gay people that he argues are not only what the film communicates, but rather, what it is made of.

> *The Boys in the Band* says, first and foremost, that gay men are unremittingly sad and pathetic creatures. […] But by no means is that the only offensive statement in the film. Homosexual men also are depicted as being self-loathing, narcissistic, emotionally unstable, sexually promiscuous, and laughably effeminate. (Streitmatter 26)

While the characters in the film are undoubtedly depicted as traumatized, concerned with physical beauty, sexually open and nonconformist when it comes to performances of masculinity, Streitmatter engages with the text in order to point out what it does wrong in its representations of gayness. For him, the film is a faulty, early misstep – only the third chapter in his book that traces the media's changing attitude to queer people, from their place in the margins to the more contemporary, central location in the media landscape marked by a political correctness when it comes to representation. Certainly, Streitmatter is not alone in this engagement with the text. David W. Dunlap, in his 1996 piece for *The New York Times*, acknowledged the systemic contempt of *The Boys in the Band* as a way to frame the impending revival of the play. "After Stonewall, the play was increasingly dismissed as synonymous with the culture that gay leaders were eager to disavow: closeted, campy, narcissistic, alcoholic and, above all, self-loathing," he writes. "Having broken a taboo, [*The Boys in the Band*] has become taboo itself" ("In a Revival"). Vito Russo, writing about the film in *The Celluloid Closet,* echoes these words, calling it "a perfunctory compendium of easily acceptable stereotypes who gather at a Manhattan birthday party and spend an evening savaging each other and their way of life," noting that, at best, the film's depiction of homosexuality points to the worst effects a homophobic society can have on its gay members, where "falsehoods and illusion of Hollywood dreams […] taught homosexuals that there were no homosexuals in polite society" (Russo 175, 176). Perhaps the most famous backlash against Friedkin's treatment of gay life on film came from Arthur Bell of *The Village Voice*, who after being notably frustrated with *The Boys in the Band*, became an instrumental figure in the demonstrations and picketing of Friedkin's film *Cruising*, even before it opened in 1980 (Guthmann 2).[2] While the pejorative adjectives, often associated with relegating gays to stereotypes, certainly stand as a way to describe Mart Crowley's characters, and Russo's assessment of their behavior as abrasive cannot be disputed, a comparative analysis of another play that was adapted for the screen, a dramatic master narrative and spiritual predecessor to *The Boys in the Band*, may provide a point of entry into Crowley's work not only in terms of its dramaturgy, but also its politics.

The connections between *The Boys in the Band* and Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* have been widely noted. Mart Crowley himself makes a connection between the two in the 2011 documentary *Making the Boys*, acknowledging that, "They say the play is, you

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[2] For more on the production of *The Boys in the Band* and *Cruising,* as well as the responses Friedkin elicited from the gay community, and Arthur Bell specifically, I recommend a recent interview with the director, written by Matthew Hayes, be consulted.

know, borrowed, if you will, from *Virginia Woolf*, and I can't say that it is not." In the same segment, playwright Terrence McNally echoes these words:

> We all knew how modern couples related to one another, and in movies, or TV, we were getting Ozzie and Harriet, kind of "idealistic" families. And suddenly, there was a man and woman who had a very complicated love-hate relationship [...] It sounded like the way people we knew spoke to one other. (*Making the Boys*)

Certainly, the feelings of marginality and the inability to perform model American citizens are ubiquitous in both works. For Albee's protagonists, George and Martha, the central problem is their lack of a child, a particularly painful fact in the face of the 1960s idea of the American dream, fuelled greatly by the Cold War and a necessarily heightened sense of nationalism. To this end, the plot rests on a complex web of illusions that the characters create in order to re-imagine themselves as parents, spouses and realized members of the society. The core problem of family is further developed through the unseen character of Martha's father, a character whose presence is nevertheless overwhelmingly felt, both in George's disdain of him and the authority he yields, and Martha's pride, as her father represents the order and authority of the system she so desperately wants to be part of. The authority of the unseen patriarch (and, by extension, the system at large) is what drives the characters into imagining and internalizing a fictitious son, as well as creating the "games" they play with their guests. The thematic thread of family as a traumatic ideal and a yearning exhibited through charade on the one hand, and the dramaturgical framework of "games" on the other, find themselves reflected in *The Boys in the Band*, communicated through the familial ties that bind this diverse group of gay Manhattanites and the dramatic party game they play in the emotionally charged third act.

The plot of *The Boys in the Band* follows a group of gay friends assembling at an apartment for a surprise birthday party for one of them, Harold. The party is hosted by Michael, the central character in both the play and the film. He not only insists on throwing the party, but also unintentionally becomes the entertainment, as his old friend from college, Alan, whom Michael has not come out to, arrives and sends Michael into a frenzy. The piece turns into an unwitting play-within-a-play, due to the fact that the group tries to act straight in front of the intruder, who exhibits both homophobia and latent homosexuality, and is then further complicated by the arrival of Harold, the birthday boy, and Michael's apparent rival. With his arrival, Michael finds the rug swept from underneath him once again, as Harold is the only member of the group whose biting eloquence parallels Michael's. After a series of loaded comments and insults, Michael devises a game in order to reassert his dominance over the group. The humiliating game, in which the guests make telephone calls to people they have loved the most in order to profess their love, completes the film's progression from lighthearted and funny to somber, ending with Michael's anxiety attack after the guests have left the party.

The trope of the family assembly (such as dinners, parties, games, weddings, funerals, or other inherently dramatic events) is easily observable in American dramatic output, and it is typically a setting for deep, painful truths to come out and affect the characters' further journey.[3] As Tom Scanlan points out,

> From O'Neill on, our playwrights have been obsessed with the failure of family harmony and with family disintegration. Similarly, our popular drama is of a

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[3] In her book, *Families We Choose*, Kath Weston specifically identifies family dinners and games, along with the labor implicit in these occasions (cooking, washing dishes, etc.) as a means of creating and solidifying familial ties among a group of friends (103-4).

> family life strained by the conflicting tensions of security and freedom, mutuality and selfhood. (Scanlan 49)

The tension between mutuality and selfhood is earlier on in Scanlan's book attributed to the shrinkage of immediate family due to increased urbanization and job-related mobility of Americans. Thus, it is in reunions that the playwrights find an opportune setting for this tension to escalate. Examples of this trope in domestic dramas are plentiful. For example, in Tracy Letts' 2007 drama *August: Osage County*, adapted for the screen in 2013, and directed by John Wells, secrets that include assisted suicide, incest, sexual and substance abuse are revealed during a series of meals, which form the structural backbone of the family reunion narrative. In *The House of Yes*, the satirical 1990 Wendy MacLeod play, adapted into a film of the same name in 1997 and directed by Mark Waters, the central incestuous relationship between a twin brother and sister is elevated and reimagined as theater and "play," as the two "perform" their relationship by imitating John and Jackie Kennedy, and specifically reenacting President Kennedy's assassination, to the bafflement of a house guest during Thanksgiving. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, directed for the screen by Mike Nichols in 1966, is another perfect example of the trope, as it shares with these plays and films a tension about the state of the family, the outside influences that threaten to unmask the core problem of the childless couple and its place in society, and a barrage of codified offences, painful confessions and insults wrapped inside an innocent set of "games" that make up a party.

The Boys in the Band, then, in spite of its singular subject matter of homosexuality, is in fact one in a series of dramatic works of both the stage and the screen that utilizes charade, play or "games" as a conduit for the excavation (if not necessarily exorcism) of the protagonists' trauma. Michael's trauma is threefold, but rooted in the same problem. The terror of being outed to his college roommate, the struggle to position himself as the one in control of the group, especially in relation to the equally verbose Harold (whose birthday party Michael is ironically hosting), and, ultimately, unhappiness with his own sexuality are all tied into his own Catholic upbringing and a tenuous relationship with his own family, the details of which are never explicitly stated, but heavily hinted at throughout the text. Much as in the case of George and Martha, the ruthless game Michael devises turns out to be his own "Mousetrap," as it ends in what is arguably the most famous piece of dialogue from the film, delivered to a distraught Michael by the victorious Harold.

> You're a sad and pathetic man. You're a homosexual, and you don't want to be. But there's nothing you can do to change it. Not all your prayers to your God, not all the analysis you can buy in all the years you've got left to live. You may very well one day be able to know a heterosexual life if you want it desperately enough. If you pursue it with the fervor with which you annihilate. But you'll always be homosexual as well. Always, Michael. Always. Until the day you die. Friends, thanks for the nifty party. (*The Boys in the Band*)

The disparagement Michael receives from Harold encapsulates the problem of *The Boys in the Band*. On the one hand, it points to the desperation attributed to gay life that so many have taken issue with in regards to the text, communicated in these lines as the idea that the only happy homosexual is a dead homosexual (itself a paraphrase of another famous line from the film). On the other hand, however, it points to a dignity and ferociousness that characterize this group of homosexuals – in his own way, it is exactly Michael's inability to negotiate his sexuality and his background that Harold resents and criticizes here. As John Loughery notes in his book *The Other Side of Silence*, it is this violent, combative arbitration of the characters' shortcomings – a “tough love” of sorts – that so many of Crowley’s detractors missed. “Also minimized by many irate observers were the bonds that still exist among the characters after all the bloodletting,” Loughery writes.

> Their bitchy ways aside, Bernard and Emory have always looked out for each other, Donald and Harold will continue to stand by Michael in his craziness, and Hank and Larry – like any male-female couple out of Cheever or Updike – will go on stumbling their way toward a workable union, despite Larry’s dalliances and Hank’s jealousy. (Loughery 298)

As is the case in so many other family dramas, the congregation that forms at the birthday party in *The Boys in the Band* ultimately indulges in a therapy session, providing catharsis in the form of hard truths and emotional gashes, broached and fueled through conflict. The game that Michael devises, no matter how cruel, makes his friends come head to head with their personal demons. Bernard’s attempt to telephone his first love, the son of a wealthy white family that Bernard’s mother worked for, ends in the film’s first real acknowledgment of Bernard’s status as the African American in the group, revealing his anger at casual racist remarks directed towards him throughout the film. Emory’s call re-establishes the “flaming” character as the most undaunted member of the group, and that he calls his straight dentist, professes his love and seems relatively undisturbed by the call suggests a parting of ways with an unrequited, unrealistic love interest. Finally, the game serves as a catalyst for the reconciliation of Larry and Hank, a committed couple struggling with monogamy.

Harold’s verbal scrutiny of Michael is the moment when the latter loses all control of the proceedings and finally descends into his own psyche, which results in a nervous breakdown. It is a crucial moment, as it draws attention to the fact that Michael’s game, in spite of his own cumbersome Catholic background, is no simple confessional discourse, but rather falls under a more productive form of friendship that Tom Roach discusses in his book *Friendship as a Way of Life*, vis-à-vis Michel Foucault's famous 1981 interview of the same name. Referring to Foucault's opposition to the idea of confession as communicated in a letter to Hervé Guibert, Roach develops the idea of "anticonfessional discourse," one that avoids the trappings of confession that insists on "a subject required to speak his sexual truth, a subject identified, classified, and managed by this truth" (Roach 23). In fact, this is how *The Boys in the Band* has traditionally been received, as if Crowley's text is not only autobiographical (which it is, but only partly), but also as if, by virtue of being one of the first widely seen and distributed dramatic American texts and films on homosexuality, it somehow communicates the essential "truth" of homosexuality. The way the cards have so quickly been stacked against *The Boys in the Band* is unfortunate, especially since the characters' friendship throughout the play points to a much more interesting discourse, that of an anticonfession amongst friends, one that brings with it "a respite from our confessional lives, from identities founded on sexuality" (Roach 23).

It is the telephone game that acts as a catalyst for group therapy, with the members of this family of friends sharing, willingly and sometimes unwillingly, the identities of the people they first loved. However, in spite of the melancholy stories of unrequited and unnoticed same-sex love that the game produces, the storytellers unwittingly choose parrhesia as a mode of discourse that is the alternative, more productive version of the Christian doctrine's confession. According to Roach, a goal of this discursive model is "to aid the listener and speaker alike in developing an autonomous, independent, full and satisfying relationship to himself" (Roach 24), with *The Boys in the Band* following the Epicurean model, that of parrhesia among friends. Parrhesia as an opportune concept for accessing this work, as it helps draw out the drama between "mutuality and selfhood," as mentioned by Scanlan in relation to family life, but is as crucially applicable to Crowley's group of friends. As is the case in so many family plays, it is the "truth" of the family, of belonging and relating, which needs to be negotiated by the subject. Here, the family is reimagined as a group of friends who are homosexual, a denominator that entraps as much as it liberates. Michael's final breakdown means surrender to an identity that requires rethinking and renegotiating one's place within a larger group. The same is true of the other participants - Bernard's phone call reveals anxiety related to being doubly marginalized, being both gay *and* black, while Larry and Hank's plotline culminates in a meditation on monogamy in the homosexual milieu. Parrhesia, then, as a model that "privileges self-transformation over self-knowledge/renunciation" (Roach 25), calls into question the "truth" of homosexuality as a fixed and stable identity, loudly and violently destabilizing it from within its own faction, the titular "band."

To look at *The Boys in the Band* as a codified family is not to dismiss or conceal its status as a gay film. Rather, it is to take into account the productive force of wrestling with heteronormative, prescribed family life by assuming a similar, yet radical, model of behavior among one's equally outcast friends. At its core, *The Boys in the Band* is about negotiating the self as part of a larger group, and its references to family, the family's structures and its specter, allow it to be deeply subversive of that structure and its tradition. In this sense, and in spite of its questionable portrayal of gay characters as ferocious, catty and often mean, the film can be seen as standing in solidarity with the political upheavals of its time, as it deconstructs the family as a collateral damage to be negotiated and then reassembled as a productive and challenging matter of community formation.

The opening dialogue itself points to family life as a trauma that stands in the way of subjectivity and needs to be confronted. In their initial conversation, Michael and his close friend and sometimes-lover Donald discuss Donald's trips to the psychiatrist, and while there is a suggestion that he suffers from depression (the film shows him taking pills, a departure from the original dramatic text), the cause of his condition is tied to his parents. "It's just that, today, I finally realized that I was raised to be a failure. I was groomed for it. Naturally, it all goes back to Evelyn and Walt," he states (*The Boys in the Band*). He goes on to briefly explain how he blames his parents for his inability to commit and succeed. In the original dramatic text, however, there is a telling piece of dialogue that deepens this idea, especially in light of Michael's later grappling with his own familial past.

> DONALD. […] I've realized it was always when I failed that Evelyn loved me the most – because it displeased Walt who wanted perfection. And when I fell short of the mark she was only too happy to make up for it with her love. (*Sits on bed.*) So I began to identify failing with winning my mother's love. And I began to fail on purpose to get it. [...] I simply retreated to a room over a garage and scrubbing floors in order to keep alive. Failure is the only thing with which I feel at home. Because it is what I was taught at home. (Crowley 12)

From the outset, the landmark drama about urban gay life positions its characters in opposition to the institution of family. Donald's monologue, especially considering the staging of the scene, undermines Russo's criticism when he wrote that "[the] 'landslide of truths' consisted ultimately of some jumbled Freudian stabs at overly protective mothers and absent fathers and lots of zippy fag humor that posed as philosophy" (Russo 175). While there is certainly humor in the film, and in this scene particularly, as Donald's discussion of his parents is countered by

Michael's rendition of Judy Garland's "Get Happy," there is a deep sense of care and support within a structure that replaces the one that has been troubling Donald. The mise-en-scène in the film, even more so than the stage directions in Crowley's writing, complements these off-hand therapeutic confessions and humorous dialogue with a sense of domesticity that marks Donald and Michael's relationship. The quick cuts and pans match a somewhat complex choreography of the two characters getting ready for the party – (un)dressing, showering and grooming, presenting each other with cosmetic products for overnight stays, all with a harmony and an intimacy that is reminiscent of the typical bedroom rituals and domesticity of heterosexual couples pervading popular media, especially those classic married couples like Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz of *I Love Lucy*, or Elizabeth Montgomery and Dick York of *Bewitched*. A wide-angle shot that introduces the scene frames the architecture of the two-story apartment as if it was a theater production in a film that otherwise favors close-ups, with Michael and Donald navigating the space of the apartment while engaged in a conversation. The aesthetics of domesticity in this, the film's early scene, sets up the apartment itself as a space that is pervaded by intimacy and co-habitation. At the same time, there is a sense of parody these characters exude that complicates this image, as Russo mentions in his criticism of the film's understanding of its characters' psychologies – however, in this context, the "zippy fag humor" can also be seen as a pastiche of and a respite from family mechanics these characters are experiencing. In this context, Judy Garland, Bette Davis, and a whole slew of other pop culture references become a reprieve shared by this group of friends, a defense mechanism and a shared language that binds them together.

Scottish psychiatrist R. D. Laing's essay on family dynamics, "The Family and the 'Family,'" published in 1971, introduces an opportune framework for the negotiation of the family crisis that permeates *The Boys in the Band*. His differentiation of the family of origin and the "family" as an internalized system of relating (stylized by Laing, and in this text, between quotation marks) allows for a more informed and accessible outline of kinship within the chosen family of Friedkin's film, as well as in other works. In this context, vis-à-vis Laing, "family" refers to "the family as a fantasy structure, […] a type of relationship between family members of a different order from the relationships of those who do not share that 'family' inside each other" (Laing 5). In other words, it is a set of relations based on a commonality that ties its constituents together in what Roach, in his theorization of Foucauldian friendship, dubs "shared estrangement" (Roach 2), a dynamic, intimacy-laden set of relations that exist outside of prescribed models of male intimacy tolerated in the army, the boarding school, or the sports team, and based on a cohesion that separates these constituents from others. Rather than just a sexual practice, if even there exists one, the "family" resembles Foucault's desire for a "homosexual mode of life," a way of living that is inclusive of people "of different age, status and social activity" and that produces "intense relations not resembling those that are institutionalized" (Foucault 310). In spite of Foucault's reservations, it seems like the "family," while bearing a resemblance to the traditional institution of family, proves itself as a space of shared estrangement in its dissatisfaction with the traditional American family and conscious efforts of upsetting its status quo. The tension between mutuality and selfhood, as theorized by Scanlan and also referred to earlier in this chapter on the example of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?,* demonstrates this dissatisfaction and assumes a central place in Albee's spiritual successor, *The Boys in the Band.* It is in the latter text that, by virtue of being shared by a group of friends whose queerness, age, nationality and citizenship bind them together, the central anxiety of both stemming from a family and belonging to a "family" finds its mode of expression in the Foucauldian arena.

The process of reenacting the "family," or one's internalized understanding of what a family means and feels like, is described by Laing as a process of "transference," or "carrying over one metamorphosis, based on being 'in' and having inside oneself one group mode of sociality, into another" (Laing 12). As an example, Laing points to business, a relational model that may be enriched or optimized by introducing a sense of "family" among colleagues. Conversely, he gives an example of the "tired businessman" who relates to his family using the internalized relational model that stems from his place of work (12). In the case of *The Boys in the Band* and its own inherent familial transferences, a brief look at Crowley as a dramatist is appropriate. Michael R. Schiavi, writing about Crowley's plays *The Boys in the Band*, *A Breeze from the Gulf*, and *For Reasons That Remain Unclear*, notes that "Mart Crowley's principal plays […] all feature protagonists grappling with a self-loathing born of, variously, homophobia, family breakdown, and childhood abuse" and quotes Gavin Lambert, who dubbed this triptych a "dramatized autobiography" (Schiavi 95). While not directly linked to *The Boys in the Band*, reading *A Breeze from the Gulf*, a coming-of-age play featuring another protagonist named Michael, certainly brings the sensation of reading a spiritual prequel to *The Boys*. The two-act play, consisting of only three characters, Michael and his parents Teddy and Loraine, reads more as a fragmented memory and deconstruction of Crowley's own upbringing in a Southern family plagued by illness, alcoholism and overbearing Catholicism, rather than a straightforward narrative. Crowley's autobiographical tendencies aside, the 1973 play carries a significant number of presentiments for the audiences already familiar with the Michael from *The Boys in the Band*. The young protagonist in *The Breeze* finds no greater joy than in hosting parties; the language he uses corrodes his sweet disposition; his interactions with his loved ones are marked by co-dependency, and concern is often wrapped in insults. Donald's recounting of his parents' divorce in *The Boys in the Band* resembles the volatile relationship Michael has with Teddy and Loraine in *A Breeze from the Gulf*, as he spends his time fraternizing with one and then the other, defining himself in relation to whoever he feels intimate with at the time. Even Michael's insistent concern with Harold's compulsive scarring of his pockmarked face with tweezers and chemicals echoes the concern and care the young Michael displays for his mother in *A Breeze from the Gulf* after she gets addicted to medication.

By noting the connection between the admittedly autobiographical *The Boys in the Band* and the rest of Crowley's opus, the family trauma as encoded in *The Boys* is made all the more visible. With its action restricted to only a few hours at a party, and the song "Anything Goes" ironically complementing its attitude, its protagonist becomes a perversion of the more innocently framed Michael from *A Breeze in the Gulf*, with the same problems now projected, or *transferred*, onto his group of friends with whom he shares his estrangement. Yet, it is arguably this perversion that brings a bigger catharsis, as it is within this congregation that the same issues feel systemic, shared and, ultimately, brought to the surface.

In his discussion of the film, Joe Carrithers expresses concern that the film, while depicting homosexuals, privileges its straight audiences. As an example, Carrithers refers to the character of Alan McCarthy, Michael's straight college roommate and the intruder to the party, whose heterosexuality is a point of a contention, especially when he exhibits homophobic behavior that, in turn, earns him the label "closet queen." Alan can be seen not only as an intruder, a fish out of water who acts as a stand-in for straight audiences, but also one who disrupts the shared estrangement that characterizes this group of friends by effectively verbalizing the two models of sanctioned gay relationality that Foucault challenges. As he gets increasingly uncomfortable with the more flamboyant gays at the party, and especially the character of Emory who he refers to as a "goddamn little pansy," Alan communicates to Michael that he doesn't mind homosexuals "[as] long as they don't do it in public, or try to force their ways on the whole damned world" (*The Boys in the Band*). On the other hand, Alan seems fairly comfortable in the presence of Hank and Larry, a couple wrestling with their monogamy, in a relationship that, according to Carrithers, evolves "from having a relationship that permits one of the partners to be promiscuous with other men to a newly defined relationship with its basis in mutual consent to monogamy" (Carrithers 68). Much like the character of Alan, Carrithers is committed to finding positive representations of a homosexual lifestyle in the film that complicates such expectations, and he locates it in the idea that Larry and Hank might reconcile and make their relationship monogamous. Even though the reconciliation in the film is far more ambiguous, Larry and Hank's possible reenactment of heterosexual domesticity is too favorable an image for Alan, caught in the midst of an unflinching queer spectacle. That Alan finds acceptable either sexual encounters "between four walls" or a performance of committed monogamy, is evocative of Foucault's condemnation of such models of relationality for imagining queerness, due to their inability to "generat[e] unease."

> [The purely sexual encounter] responds to the reassuring canon of beauty and it cancels everything that can be uncomfortable in affection, tenderness, friendship, fidelity, camaraderie and companionship, things which our sanitized society can't allow a place for without fearing the formation of new alliances and the tying together of unforeseen lines of force. (Foucault 309)

Conversely, in his deliberation on Foucault's essay, Roach writes on the "lover's fusion of identities," another ready-made model of possible queer relationality, as the opposite pitfall, one that "bolsters Romantic myths of monogamous love crucial to the institution of marriage, which serves merely to 'reproduce the interplay of relations and maintain the law that governs them'" (Roach 46). If, according to Foucault, the possibility of a destabilizing form of queer relationality lies somewhere in between the two models, borrowing elements both from temporary sexual encounters and long-term commitments that emulate, or may indeed take the form of a marriage, without being assimilated in either, then one may look at the character of Alan and see in him a force destructive to this group's shared estrangement. Their "family" is compromised precisely because, due to the presence of a stand-in for heteronormativity and an advocate for "ready-made" modes of relating among queers, their companionship and affection that borrow from both formulas of queer behavior have to be contained. It is interesting to note that the 1974 film, *A Very Natural Thing* (dir. Christopher Larkin), is similarly built on the tension that these two modes produce, with its two lead characters' opposing ideas of what constitutes a relationship. That film, however, does not complicate the issue further, instead positioning the monogamous one as the hero and culminating in a celebratory fusion of his identity to that of another boyfriend's.

The sudden, physical eruptions of the characters in *The Boys in the Band* fracture the otherwise static direction, and open up the mise-en-scène of a film otherwise constructed mainly of medium shots and close-ups. These eruptions uniformly stem from the tension that both sanctioned and unsanctioned ideas of relationality and family provoke in the characters. Apart from the opening shot, and a lighthearted dancing sequence, the two most physically engaging moments of the film include violent outbursts, one against another individual, and the other a solitary one. Following a verbal sparring match during which Alan is jokingly accused that his marriage may not be sexually stimulating, his physical attack on the ostentatious Emory serves as a release of his earlier qualms about Emory's behavior, and flaming exhibitionism of "gayness" in general when it is not confined to sex between four walls. Conversely, Michael's final breakdown, triggered by Harold's accusation that he has never come to terms with his identity and his past, comes as a cathartic release in light of his grappling between group membership and selfhood, of negotiating his past family and the current "family." The two moments of emotional explosion position the film as a melodrama, a genre that, according to Susan Hayward, has traditionally been concerned with family in light of societal changes. As such, it is a genre in which "the family becomes a site of patriarchy and capitalism – and, therefore, reproduces it" (S. Hayward 214). Moreover, Hayward writes that melodrama "reflects the bourgeois desire for social order to be expressed through the personal" (216). As is the case in its predecessor, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, the melodramatic turn *The Boys in the Band* takes is fitting, since it becomes a narrative about the tension emanating from the heteronormatively defined family, marked by monogamy, domesticity and patriarchy, and defended by Alan, the intruder to the party. The film, however, positions the "family" as an opposing structure and a critical discourse, one that is more fluid and ambivalent than what a biological family permits, and one that, due to its parrhesiatic dynamics that are transformational and resist easy "truths," challenges and empowers its members in equal measure.

Chapter Two

Parting Glances:

A “Family” of His Own Making

The ways in which *The Boys in the Band* frames the negotiation of “family” by employing the tropes of melodrama seems a perfect segue for moving into the discussion of “family” in the context of AIDS. In his article, “Erotic Self-Images in the Gay Male AIDS Melodrama,” Thomas Waugh writes on the conceptualization of the AIDS crisis in cinema, and more specifically within the genre of melodrama as “the genre that popular culture has traditionally drawn on to work out the strains of nuclear family under the patriarchy” (Waugh 123). In this chapter, I will explore the ways in which the AIDS crisis reproduces, but also complicates, the relations of kinship, conjugality and familial life that I have already tackled vis-à-vis *Boys in the Band*. For this purpose, the 1986 film *Parting Glances*, directed by Bill Sherwood, will serve as a case study. While the move from 1970 and *The Boys in the Band* implies a temporal gap, I am more interested in the discussion and representation of AIDS as another moment that thematically reorganizes the “family” rather than charting out the history of late 20th century queer cinema. In order to minimize my omissions, and to further contextualize familial tropes that make up my argument, I will also be referring to films from either side of 1986. Aside from mentioning *A Very Natural Thing* (dir. Christopher Larkin, 1974) in the previous chapter, these pages will also include mentions of the film *Hair* (dir. Miloš Forman, 1979), based on the 1967 Broadway musical of the same name, the television movie *An Early Frost* (dir. John Erman, 1985), the 1985 dramatic work *The Normal Heart* along with its 2014 film adaptation directed by Ryan Murphy, the films *Longtime Companion* (dir. Norman René,

1989) and *Philadelphia* (dir. Jonathan Demme, 1993), as well as the 1996 stage musical *Rent*, adapted for the screen in 2005 and directed by Chris Columbus, and the mini-series *Angels in America* (dir. Mike Nichols, 2003), based on Tony Kushner's 1993 play of the same name.

Waugh argues that melodrama has traditionally been a genre of choice for gay men and women alike, due to both of these groups' position "outside patriarchal power, in ambiguous and contradictory relationship to it " (123). It is not surprising, then, that, other than in activist filmmaking of the time, representations of AIDS found their natural form in the genre, as they combine "tears," "political lucidity" and "other bodily secretions" (Waugh 124). These films also, however, form an important point of entry into the discussion of queer kinship. On the one hand, the melodramatic conventions are already rooted in exposing "the way in which sexual difference under patriarchy is fraught, explosive and erupts dramatically into violence within its own private stamping ground, the family" (Mulvey, qtd. in S. Hayward 120), as Waugh himself has already implied. On the other hand, the domesticity that pervades melodrama, hand in hand with the AIDS crisis itself, ushers even more familial tropes into queer narratives and, quite literally, queer spaces: tropes such as caregiving, mourning and funerals, to name a few, work alongside those of the family reunion, confession, and childhood trauma that I discussed in the previous chapter. The treatment of these tropes complicates and deconstructs the traditional idea of the American family while simultaneously championing the queer chosen family.

In her book, *AIDS Literature and Gay Identity*, Monica B. Pearl recognizes the importance of burials and mourning, and posits that "the repetition of burials for the gay community during the time of AIDS had the effect of cementing the community as a common community" (8). She goes on to explain, however, that this was not the first time the circumstance of death acted as a glue in the formation of queer communities. She cites that parental fear of having gay children is one of the main phenomena that linked queerness and death in the first place – biological death, but also the "death of innocence, death of heterosexual identity, death of parental/adult authority, death of the natural order" (Pearl 8). In this light, one cannot speak of death in the gay community, especially in the time of AIDS, without remaining conscious of the difficult relationship between family, homosexuality and mortality. Norman René's *Longtime Companion* (1989), for example, is a film where the AIDS crisis is imagined specifically as this "repetition of burials." Its final scene, where a couple of friends who are still alive fantasize that their loved ones will join them on the beach on Fire Island for one last party, underscores the relationship between death and the gay community. Furthermore, one need not look further than the first television movie made on the subject of AIDS, John Erman's *An Early Frost* (1985), for a narrative that combines the idea of "coming out" to that of AIDS, as it centers on a young man who returns to his family in order to reveal that he is gay and diagnosed with AIDS. In the face of sickness and death, especially when AIDS literalized that progression so compactly as it did in the 1980s and 1990s, family and its tropes are bound to not only resurface, but take center stage in the form of caregivers, lovers, friends and even antagonists.

The link between disease and the familial certainly exists outside of AIDS, and needs to be acknowledged in this context. For example, Robert Eberwein writes in his 1995 article "Disease, Masculinity, & Sexuality in Recent Films" that there is a delicate connection between the two, and cites prostate cancer as a case where men were "unwilling to get a physical exam because they believe to do so is unmanly," coming to the conclusion that there is a "remarkable demonstration of the relation of disease to […] ideology of gender" (156). Following his argument on the relationship between masculinity and disease, Eberwein distinguishes between the way heterosexual men are seen battling a disease, these films "affirming the possibility of health," and the "ideological negativity" in the portrayal of homosexual characters with AIDS, which he claims means to watch "the inevitable disintegration and observe the progress of death" (160). Pearl does not see this division when she claims, vis-à-vis Edmund White, that "having been excluded from the normative fictional (realist) narratives of love, marriage, procreation, and death, finally gay men are included in the universal theme of degeneration, and death" (Pearl 19). In other words, with a sudden identification of an entire group of people with sickness and death, gay men finally have access to universality through the unfortunate reality of AIDS. In this light, and in spite of the "ideological negativity" that precludes hopeful representations of homosexual masculinity in the context of AIDS (or, perhaps, precisely because of this alternative, more vulnerable depiction of masculinity under medical duress that does not necessarily disqualify integrity and strength), AIDS acts as not only the great normalizer, but also a force that complicates and deconstructs ideologies of gender, sexuality, patriarchy and the natural order, notions that naturally exist under the umbrella of family and where they are most readily reproduced.

The trope of caregiving is one that is at the center of AIDS community formation, as well as its filmic representation. Following the paradigm set by Michel Foucault and furthered by Tom Roach in his discussion of queer friendship, this relationality stems from the fertile space of human involvement located somewhere between two models of sanctioned gay behavior, the hook-up and the emulation of heterosexual conventions in a "lover's fusion of identities" (Roach 46). Indeed, the need for care, of the PWA's body, but also of his spirit, creates a diverse relational space filled with either family or "family" – a host of lovers, friends or "buddies." The newly created mode of relationality and caregiving dubbed "the buddy friendship" is discussed both by Roach and Waugh in terms that widely draw caregiving as labor particular to the formation of "families." For example, in his discussion of the 1985 film *Buddies* (dir. Arthur J. Bressan, Jr.), Waugh underscores in the volunteer's relationship with the character dying of AIDS a crucial sexual dimension. Providing sexual release to a PWA through masturbation, Waugh argues, "becomes an affirmation of [the PWA's] identity, a bond between him and the world, an assurance that he will not die alone" (125). Roach, on the other hand, describes the buddy friendship as a "framework encouraging certain intimacies" and an "experiment in difference" (112), claiming that its goal "is not to eliminate social/economic/health dissymmetries from the relationship but to maintain them precisely as a productive tension" (112-3). Not only does this reading of buddy friendships imply another form of parrhesia (which I will return to later in this chapter in relation to the PWA in *Parting Glances* and his social milieu), but also with it being this experiment in difference (of health statuses, but also of socioeconomic backgrounds, age, gender or sexual identities), it relates to another staple of friendship as theorized by Foucault, that of "shared estrangement."

While I used the term "shared estrangement" in the previous chapter to describe, quite literally, the separation that exists between the characters in *The Boys in the Band* and the American culture at large, which in turn produces their "family" on the "us vs. them" basis, here I am referring to a version of this expression theorized in the context of AIDS by Roach, vis-à-vis Foucault. In recognizing AIDS as a moment, both cultural and personal, in which life and death are visibly hanging in the balance, Roach writes of "estrangement from others and the world" that necessarily happens in the psyche. He sees this estrangement as inherently productive, however, as he reads Foucault's relationship with mortality as "[contemplating] death's immanence to life and arguably [cultivating] a relationship with death adversative to biopolitical dictates" (Roach 39). Combining this culturally shared estrangement that draws attention to and works against biopolitical (but also essentialist and patriarchal) control with the idea of the buddy system as a version of caregiving that mixes medical, conversational and sexual care, brings us back to the idea of "family" as a fluid and potentially subversive mode of relating implicit in the relationship between a PWA and a healthy "buddy."

` The structure of *Parting Glances,* the 1986 feature film directed by Bill Sherwood and a key entry into the AIDS film canon due to its human portrayal of the PWA, implies that, at a basic level, the film serves as a panorama of queer urban life, rooted in the melancholy and transience typical of the AIDS crisis. Indeed, the film takes place in a 24-hour period, bookended with an exterior shot of the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument in Manhattan's Upper West Side. The locales and situations the characters find themselves in follow, in short succession, their private spaces, where the characters are shown in their respective apartments, then at a dinner party, and then, finally at a house party; public spaces, at the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument, for example, or at the famed Manhattan nightclub Limelight; and finally Fire Island, the popular seaside resort for gay men and a satellite of sorts of New York's gay urban living. However, along with its possible status as a gay city film focused on New York City, the centrality of the PWA character, Nick (played with much gusto by Steve Buscemi), transforms the narrative into one dedicated to representing the negotiations of "family," as the characters' fluid relationships make up the film's main conflict, while the omnipresence of AIDS reorganizes these relationships into a delicate web of obligation, responsibility and caregiving.

The plot of the film concerns the main character, Michael (played by Richard Ganoung), and his negotiation of his parallel relationships with his partner Robert (John Bolger) and his best friend Nick, who is dying of AIDS. There is a palpable tension between Michael and Robert from the outset, as Robert is not only to go away to Brazil on business, but is also avoiding saying goodbye to Nick before he leaves. This awkward emotional *ménage à trois* is best described by the film's two early scenes, the first set in Michael and Robert's apartment where we see them having sex, packing Robert's bags for the trip, and Michael working. Their domesticity is quickly replaced by that of Michael and Nick, as the former pays a visit to his friend's apartment where he lives in relative solitude, spending his days listening to music and watching one of his many television sets. Michael navigates Nick's apartment with a comfort and familiarity: he has a key, he makes Nick his protein shake and goes through his medicine cabinet. They spend their time talking, arm wrestling and playing cards. As Waugh puts it, "Comfort is implicitly shared back and forth through caresses, touching, looks and smiles" (129). The intimacy, and even physical closeness Michael has with Nick, is comparable to the closeness he has with his partner, as the film draws a parallel between romantic and friendly love. Waugh describes the time they spend together as,

> [The] strengthening of his relationship with Nick, his AIDS-stricken buddy, a character for whom he has always had an unacknowledged and unrequited love deeper even than his sexual love for the *Gentlemen's Quarterly*-style heel he lives with – shades of Scarlett O'Hara's for Ashley Wilkes. (Waugh 127)

The love that Michael has for his buddy points back to friendship as theorized by Foucault and Roach as simultaneously private (rooted in conjugality) and communal (amicable, a product and a part of a community) (Roach 4), while the implied domesticity, intimacy and caregiving expand this understanding of friendship to include a sense of kinship and filiation, not to mention responsibility.

As is the case in other AIDS narratives set in, or coming out of, the 1980s, there is a pronounced tension regarding the PWA and the people in his life who carry the responsibility of caregiving. For example, in Larry Kramer's play *The Normal Heart*, the agitprop piece first performed as early as 1985 and directed for television in 2014 by Ryan Murphy, an explosive confrontation ensues between the HIV-negative protagonist, Ned, and his boyfriend who is dying of AIDS when the latter loses morale and rejects Ned's optimism and his insistence that he eat healthy. "I am so sick of fighting and everybody's stupidity and blindness and guilt trips," Ned states. "If you don't want the food, don't eat the food. I don't care. Take your poison!" (*The Normal Heart*) Ned's odyssey to mobilize a community in the early years of AIDS and to spread awareness about the disease is rooted in his own domestic situation, the cultural burden of AIDS condensed in his own "plagued" relationship with his partner. A comparable scene can also be found in Jonathan Demme's 1993 film *Philadelphia*, where the character of Miguel (Antonio Banderas) expresses frustration when his partner, Andrew (Tom Hanks), is considering skipping a treatment.

A similar tension emitting from the responsibility of caregiving becomes one of the key conflicts in Tony Kushner's 1993 play *Angels in America*, as well as in the 2003 mini-series adaptation directed by Mike Nichols. The central character of Prior, a gay men in 1985, is abandoned by his longtime partner Louis after being diagnosed with AIDS, and their final reunion serves as one in a series of cathartic resolutions the narrative offers. It is interesting to note, however, that in both *Philadelphia* and *The Normal Heart*, the obligation to take care of the PWA is heavily staged within the domestic, almost conjugal relationship between a PWA and his partner (even though both texts, and *The Normal Heart* especially, are undoubtedly concerned with the community building and activist efforts that came as a response to the way AIDS was handled in political and judicial circles, respectively). In contrast, both *Angels in America* and *Parting Glances* introduce a number of people in between and around the PWA and his buddy.

Parting Glances specifically features a host of people who, in one way or another, react to and are connected to Nick, typically through his buddy Michael. Just like in *Angels in America*, where the unlikely ties and connections made between people all somehow have Prior at their center, *Parting Glances* insists on extended networks of caregiving and support. These networks include Michael's straight girl friend, his and Robert's sexually ambiguous married friends, and even members of their circle who have given up on Nick altogether, and who Michael continually badgers to reach out to their sick friend. Here, conjugality is imagined as an impediment to community formation, and more fluid and complex relationships that combine the private and the communal are valued above any other mode of relating.

It is important to note that there is no biological family to be found in *Parting Glances*. That Michael at one point even verbalizes that he and his friends will have to be the ones to inform Nick's father of his condition after Nick passes not only reads as a very particular and paradigmatic responsibility in the AIDS context, but is also evocative of Monica B. Pearl's observation of queer filiation:

> Romantic partnerships and biological families are understood to be the sources of disappointment not fidelity. In fact, families – biological families – have often been depicted as a constant source of terrible disappointment. (Pearl 148)

In this light, then, it is important to understand the caregiving in *Parting Glances*, but also in other AIDS narratives, as a facet of "family" that finds its shape in different relational categories. For example, Nick's relationship with Michael is best described as friendly, in spite (or, according to Foucault, precisely because) of their sexual tension. However, in turn, Michael counts on both his married friends and his own lover to provide him with strength and support. The latter relationship is one that particularly drives the characters' development in the latter half of the film, as Robert finally realizes that, for all of Michael's caretaking of Nick, Michael himself needs to be taken care of. The "family" here becomes, then, a diverse and complicated set of relationships among a variety of members.

The "family" as a fantasy structure, as R.D. Laing dubs it, is presented in *Parting Glances* as indispensable, and in similar fashion to Laing's theorizations, it is never static. The film's shifting focus as it surveys the Manhattan queer scene is reminiscent of Laing's hypothesis that "the 'family' undergoes modulations and other transformations in the process of internalization and in its subsequent history as fantasy" (17). In other words, the "family" must remain flexible, depending on whoever its constituents are at any given moment and what kind of relationship they forge. However, in spite of the "family's" inherent ambiguity, it ultimately results in a normalized idea of a milieu and its dynamics, which *Parting Glances,* like any other queer cultural text, can be seen as representing and reproducing. The atmosphere, aesthetics and the vocabulary of the film package this variety of relations as a particular history and "family," reproducing its conventions as a promise of a community. Pearl reads the queer literary output in the same way I understand the filmic, when she theorizes that an "imagined gay community" that gay individuals long for, "is established at the level of representation through a culture of the printed word that is structured through reading and the imagined social space it produces" (7). Similarly, the emotional and visual spaces of *Parting Glances* (Michael and Nick's house, Limelight, Fire Island, etc.) are reproduced as places and social configurations where "family" can take place and caregiving is scaffolded among the milieu's variety of members.

One of the strategies employed in *Parting Glances* for the purposes of affirming its cast of characters in a time of homophobia and, especially, fear of AIDS, is to surround them by a diverse cast of secondary characters that are both male and female, gay and straight, and living a variety of lifestyles. This strategy is explained by Pilipp and Shull in the context of TV movies as one where "in order to appeal to rather than appall the populace," these films "redirect primary emphasis away from the anxieties, self-reproaches, and fears of the HIV-infected (or the world of homosexuals) and toward the reactions of those around him" (20). In spite of the obvious discriminatory implications of such a strategy when representing AIDS, I find it interesting that this viewpoint succinctly explains why AIDS movies (made for television, or otherwise) are effectively about "family" inasmuch as they are about PWAs. Moreover, this line of reasoning echoes Roach's idea of AIDS caregiving and activism containing "seeds of a post-identitarian politics." Developing his idea of the buddy system as a parrhesiastic, creative dynamic, he posits that "in revealing the instability of national, cultural, and ethnic identities rooted in diversity, AIDS gives rise to a multitude of its own making" (Roach 107). Pearl also sees AIDS as a force that gives a sense of universality to gay existence where before it was so marginal and othered. She dubs AIDS "a universal signifier that applies equally to the lives of those who can be considered to dwell in the heterosexual mainstream and to the lives of gay men," and in that context, she sees the universal quest for romantic love to have been replaced by a quest for "an unconventional but still satisfying sense of family" (Pearl 39). Even when Nick is absent from a scene in *Parting Glances*, his absence is felt. Much like Tennessee Williams' Sebastian Venable, he is either the person people are talking about, or a topic that is being avoided. Not only does this make him and his condition omnipresent in the film, it also unites this diverse set of characters, with Nick and his buddy Michael acting as common denominators.

Under the specter of AIDS, Sherwood's New York City becomes a place where people's relations, friendships and even marriages, are fluid and in a constant state of flux. The imminent mortality that Nick shares with his friends and that makes his struggle universal is reflected in the relationships of people around him. Michael and Robert's separation carries a sense of dire finitude, because with Robert gone, Michael loses a support system he needs in dealing with his best friend's mortality. Their married friends Beth and Cecil, on the other hand, find comfort in each other even though Cecil prefers men, and that their marriage has an expiration date remains unchallenged – moreover, its eventual disintegration is portrayed as an inevitability that ushers in other potential relationships for both characters. Sherwood even introduces a leitmotif of Michael's Russian neighbors, a single mother and her young daughter who calls Michael "daddy" and who, when he points out that he is in fact not her father, replies with a whispered, "That's okay" (*Parting Glances*). In a city where people have a tendency to leave their loved ones, either by dying or by moving away, Sherwood insists on the ties that bind them while they are still together, no matter how long or short these ties may last. The transient nature of urban relationships corresponds to Kylo-Patrick R. Hart's idea of the city as AIDS dystopia. Drawing from scholar Antony Easthope, Hart writes in his book, *The AIDS Movie: Representing a Pandemic in Film and Television*, that,

> The city is presented as a site of transcendental (rather than social) alienation in which human life is experienced, ultimately, as being somewhat unfulfilling because something essential (even if not readily identifiable) is felt to be missing. […] As such, the city is represented to be the place of AIDS infection, where death and dying make up a depressingly regular component of everyday life. (Hart 72, 73)

In light of this view of the city as AIDS dystopia, it seems particularly meaningful that Sherwood universalizes the finitude Nick and his friends are facing by offsetting it with a whole host of relationships that are, in one way or another, dying. Furthermore, he imbues Roach's "multitude of its own making" with a sense of, as I have already argued, responsibility and caretaking. As is the case in so many other AIDS narratives, from the interplay of Mormonism, AIDS and other "national themes" in *Angels in America*, to the racially, socially and sexually diverse cast of Jonathan Larson's 1996 AIDS musical *Rent*, this multitude of identities is normalized and reconstructed as a dynamic, if impermanent kinship.

For all the impact they have on people around them, especially in the AIDS film where the struggle tends to be, as Pilipp and Shull argue, displaced from PWAs onto people who constitute their "family" and deal with loss and caretaking, the PWA should not be relegated to a mere object of mourning. In *Parting Glances* especially, the character of Nick acts both as glue and a force of disruption in people's lives, as his sharp wit and acerbic worldview keep his buddies on their toes. Perhaps surprisingly, there has been a marked disparagement of the way the character of Nick is drawn. Writing on the film's attitude towards (homo)sexuality, Thomas Waugh asserts that "sexuality seems to be less transformational in both its personal and dramatic operation than a dramatic pretext and a psychic plateau to be left behind" (127), but seems to agree with the implication that a certain desexualization of Nick is what creates an alternative of intimacy and kinship to Michael and Robert's relationship. On the other hand, Eberwein uses harsher words in his article on disease and masculinity. He describes Nick's countenance as "weakness and wraithlike gauntness" (159), and captions a movie still of Nick with the sentence, "The homosexual lead character in *Parting Glances*, who has AIDS, has no sexual partner and is seen to waste away" (158). However, the lack of sexual partner in itself, aside from suggesting Nick's trauma of sex for fear of transmission (a fear that he verbalizes in the film), does not necessarily exclude the PWA from the mechanics of kinship, conjugality or intimacy. In fact, *Parting Glances* presents an image of a PWA who is simultaneously full of agency and resistant to victimhood.

Throughout the film, Nick is portrayed as a character that shakes his circle of friends from their complacencies, whether they are the banality of mainstream gay culture obsessed with body image or the pretentiousness of the art scene (both, it should be noted, frames of thought that impede people in connecting and forging relationships due to their exclusionary nature). For example, Sherwood inserts a recurring dream sequence where Nick and Michael interrupt their bourgeois friend's Greek-themed pool party and lampoon him and the beefcake models he keeps around his Fire Island property by pushing them into the pool and starting a food fight, echoing a similar scene in Miloš Forman's *Hair* (a film similarly engaged with the idea of "family" in the face of death, albeit death from going to war). Similarly, he incorporates a jarring sequence where a foreign artist fetishizes Nick's condition and calls him "pregnant with death," and Nick in turn holds him with a knife to his throat, literalizing for the offender the experience of having AIDS. This scene, in its own way, presages director Gregg Araki's rebellious attitude to the pandemic, particularly in his film *The Living End* (1992), where victimhood is replaced by violent outbursts against the world. Mainly, however, it is Nick's egalitarian and parrhesiastic relationship with Michael that prevents him from becoming objectified as a walking image of death. The two maintain a productive verbal tension that works in both directions and prevents the PWA from being objectified within a more traditional format of confessional discourse in caretaking. In other words, Michael remains in a discursive engagement with his friend, refusing to talk about his death and resisting confessional discourse. They enact parrhesia as described by Foucault – "the verbal act by which the subject […] places himself in a relation of dependence with regard to the other person and at the same time modifies the relationship he has with himself" (Foucault, qtd. in Roach 25). This relationship echoes director Arthur J. Bressan Jr.'s 1985 film *Buddies*, the earliest AIDS film and one that repeatedly positions the buddy system as a mode of relating that is transformational and challenging for both the patient and the caretaker.

Even from his metaphorical deathbed, Nick still has the agency and the influence to pose a challenge to, and remain a constructive force for his friend. While Eberwein refers to a scene where Nick unsuccessfully videotapes his will as a "mark of his [masculine] impotency" (160), the film underplays this by having Nick talk about his responsible sexual life in spite of his medical status, and about his absent father within the same scene. Here, he simultaneously casts off both the presumption of the "victim continuum," or the "intentional pursuit of 'deviant' and 'immoral' behaviors" typical of AIDS narratives (Hart 39), and a queer person's obligation to biological family, which in itself represents a continuation of the link between family and mortality that Pearl laid out. In so doing, Nick becomes a particular hybrid, an undoubtedly sexual but also *ethical* gay man with AIDS who willingly replaces his disappointing biological family with the one he has chosen for himself.

The will itself reflects Nick's tendency towards his "family," and particularly Michael, and the centrality of this relationship in the context of AIDS. While he does leave his father ten thousand dollars that "should buy [him] a nice weekend in Atlantic City," his decision to leave Michael fifty thousand, with the rest going to another couple of friends and the Gay Men's Health Crisis "for care for poor people with AIDS and not to medical research, because if the feds can spend a trillion bucks on bombs, then they can spend a little on research," (*Parting Glances*) points to a reorganization of priorities when it comes to relationships. In this light, the scene where Nick tapes his will (and that Eberwein labels a touchstone of both the character's progressive deterioration and failing masculinity), becomes a reaffirmation of Nick's place in his milieu, as he shows his allegiance is first and foremost to his buddy, Michael, and his "family" (both the people he knows and the larger, imagined homosexual community), in contrast to his own biological father, to whom he can only wish a happy gambling trip. With this pivotal scene, Nick's roles as someone who needs help and someone who provides it, financially and otherwise, are blurred, and his masculinity is only impeded if one is to hold the patriarchal standards of masculinity to still stand in a film that obviously rejects them and values in their place relationships that are transient (the transience is nowhere better implied than in the will-recording scene, in itself a staging of finitude and mortality), but also flexible and based on caretaking and loyalty.

Nick's mention of Gay Men's Health Crisis, or the GMHC, is not only a thinly veiled call for action and advocacy in a film about AIDS that emerged in a time as crucial and volatile as 1985. The name-dropping, coupled with his quip about the government's refusal to invest in AIDS research, is also a moment which imbues the PWA with political and personal agency, his passion for video editing echoing the video art initiatives of 1980s queer activists. His buddy Michael reiterates this call for action in the film's emotionally charged final movement, when he accuses Robert of leaving to escape Michael's anguish when Nick dies, proclaiming in addition that he will "go after every politician, idiot doctor and smug, born-again asshole" (*Parting Glances*). The political consciousness of the film remains rooted in Nick, and he crucially is never canonized or made into a martyr or a victim. That he retains his agency and magnetic influence over both Michael and the viewer, when he mocks the idea of escaping and sardonically refuses the idea of moving away from New York, is crucial. The film's premise of people searching for an escape from the ties that bind them is resolved not only with Robert returning to Michael and, presumably, rekindling their relationship, but also by Nick remaining at the center of his “family” and acting as the driving force that disrupts the complacencies of (queer) living while he himself is living. That last, surprisingly breezy scene, set on a beach on Fire Island, where Nick gets Michael to join him under the pretense that he is going to commit suicide, also manages to lampoon the mourning, canonization and the inevitable dehumanization of PWAs that is so often found in AIDS narratives.

Eberwein writes that, “to follow the trajectory of an AIDS victim photographically is, typically, to watch the inevitable disintegration and observe the progress of death” (160). Such an outlook is easily observable in films like *The Normal Heart*, for example, which climaxes in Ned’s boyfriend’s death just after they have exchanged vows on his deathbed, or even Jonathan Larson’s *Rent*, where the calculatedly named character of Angel dies in the beginning of the second act but is omnipresent throughout, as her friends memorialize and refer to her in almost mythical terms that ultimately remove any semblance of character and relegate her to a figure of death instead of life. *Angels in America*, on the other hand, makes this canonization of the AIDS sufferer the play’s main problem, with the character of Prior ultimately refusing to become a prophet and turning away from heaven’s door in order to live on, in spite of the agony of his condition, “past hope” (*Angels in America).* That Sherwood refuses to have Nick die at the end of *Parting Glances* is an empowering strategy, echoing writer Andrew Holleran, whose character proclaimed that, “Everything that’s happened the last twenty years, the acceptance of gays, is a, superficial, and b, because we are dying. As we should be, in their logic” (Holleran, “The Housesitter,” qtd. in Pearl 156). By keeping Nick alive, Sherwood allows his central character to fly in the face of “their logic,” as Holleran puts it, “they” being “every politician, idiot doctor and smug, born-again asshole,” to borrow Michael’s rhetoric, as well as the society at large as a systemic web of oppression spearheaded by the nation-state, patriarchy and religion. It is the kinship that Nick champions and partakes in, as well as his sharp tongue and the refusal to be canonized as a victim, by his friends or the world at large, that becomes the alternative to mourning, deathbeds and despair: a “family” of his own making.

Chapter Three

Paris Is Burning:

A House Is Not a Home

In his book on Jennie Livingston's 1990 documentary *Paris Is Burning*, Lucas Hilderbrand boils down the film to a succinct, yet all-encompassing précis. He writes that the film "is not a solemn social-realist exposé (though social issues are directly and frequently addressed) as much as it is about queer strategies for living" (Hilderbrand 86). *Paris Is Burning*, by virtue of not only being one of the most obvious visualizations of queer kinship, but also of its positioning of the queer "family" as a central "strategy for living" for its otherwise disenfranchised subjects, makes for an indispensable case study in an overview of the formation of queer chosen families on film. The documentary, released in 1990 but shot over the later half of the 1980s, centers on the ballroom community in New York City, an ongoing competition in cross-dressing, dance and interpretation of various lifestyles and vestimentary practices. The first half of the film focuses on the structure of the balls themselves, the different competitive categories and the competitors – drag queens, transgendered and transsexual folk who belong to and compete for different collectives called Houses, while the latter half of the film focuses on specific individuals' ambitions, background and life stories.

Paris Is Burning occupies a singular position within the corpus of this thesis, as it not only represents a switch from fiction film to documentary, but it is also the only film in which the "family" is readily observable and verbalized. Whereas the mechanics and structures of "family" are certainly present in both *The Boys in the Band* and *Parting Glances*, as well as other films and dramatic texts I have mentioned, *Paris Is Burning* makes the most direct correlation (or, rather, points most obviously to the gap between) biological family and "family" as a fantasy structure in the queer milieu. The film opens with a vantage point of family when, during a montage of shots depicting the street life of queer people of color in New York City, an unidentified man's voice recounts his father's advice to him.

> I remember my dad say, "You have three strikes against you in this world. Every black man has two – that they're just black and they're male. But you're black and you're male and you're gay. You're gonna have a hard fuckin' time." Then he said, "If you're gonna do this, you're gonna have to be stronger than you ever imagined." (*Paris Is Burning*)

By placing this quote in the beginning of the film, Livingston immediately suggests what the stakes are for her young subjects. Their status as people of color is foregrounded, with the implication of a double, or even triple, marginalization, as the disembodied (and thus, one could argue, emblematic) voice stresses the denominators "gay" and "male." The black male is not only seen as a threat, and thus threatened, by white society, but the homosexual black male is at a loss even within his own community, his homosexual desire posing a threat to masculinity in a context where "the construction of gender is dependent upon the construction of [heterosexuality]; therefore its phallocentric politics [necessitate] the subordination of not only women but 'effeminate' men as well" (Cheney 184). *Paris Is Burning*, a film that takes place at this intersection of race, gender and sexuality, is crucially a film about family, as its opening implies. Livingston's framing of this intersection of problems with a piece of familial wisdom is a tip-off that it will be within the family, or "family," that the "queer strategies of living" are going to be situated. Furthermore, the idea of "family" is deepened by the film's focus on race, and in this sense, *Paris Is Burning* is a welcome case study among the films mentioned previously – all decidedly white and middle-class, with the exception of the black character of Bernard in *The Boys in the Band*.

At the forefront of the ballroom scene, and by extension, Livingston's film, are the so-called Houses. These are unofficial collectives whose members pledge their allegiance to and perform for, while in return securing a place in the community, as well as economical and emotional care. In his article, "Gender/Racial Realness: Theorizing the Gender System in Ballroom Culture," Marlon M. Bailey writes that these collectives empower their constituents to "use performance to unmark themselves as gender and sexual nonconforming subjects" by passing as the opposite gender through vestimentary and grooming practices (and, in some cases, sexual reassignment surgery) in order to ensure their safety in light of "discrimination and violence in the urban space" (Bailey 366). *Paris Is Burning* introduces a number of Houses, including the House of Xtravaganza (presided over by Angie Xtravaganza), House of LaBeija (presided over by Pepper LaBeija) and House of St. Laurent, to name a few. In writing on Angie Xtravaganza in her capacity as the House Mother, the instrumental, guiding role of a caretaker in any House, Hilderbrand argues that the film presents her as the "perfect mother," her motherhood "not defined by gender but by acts of love and mentorship" (62). In this respect, the familial structure that a House replicates is a continuation of the queer "family" tradition, with focus on emotional support, caregiving and, ultimately, mourning. The latter is especially evident in Angie's reflections on the tragic murder of one of her own "children," Venus Xtravaganza, one of Livingston's most heavily featured subjects in the documentary. In what is another example of death and mourning as essential components of "family" life, queer or otherwise, Angie reflects on Venus' murder by acknowledging that "that's part of life as far as being a transsexual in New York City and surviving" (*Paris Is Burning*), a comment that Hilderbrand reads as “Angie clearly [missing] her daughter, but [maintaining] a stoic public face” (82).

It is interesting to note that, in spite of being portrayed as a “perfect mother,” Angie’s appearance in the film, no matter how brief, is laced with contradictions. When she is introduced in a one-on-one interview, she talks about her role as a mentor to the members of the house Xtravaganza in soft, demure fashion and wearing a conservative dress. Livingston then cuts to Angie on the street, surrounded by her Children, one of whom brags that it was him who paid for her breast implants. In this scene, Angie is wearing a low-cut tank top, and is seen exposing her breasts to onlookers at a crossroad, letting the Children manhandle them, and even suck on them while the “son” who paid for her surgery exclaims, “Our mother even nurses us! She’s a good woman” (*Paris Is Burning*). Livingston then cuts to a ballroom sequence, where Angie is presented with a Mother of the Year award and which she receives while strutting down the runway in another conservative outfit. This sequence of contrasting images of Angie complicates the idea of her as a “perfect mother,” lampooning the traditional idea of motherhood and gendered caretaking through Angie’s spectacle on the street.

The montage draws attention to the fact that the formation of “family” in the ballroom scene is no mere simulacrum of the mainstream society’s ideas of mothers, fathers, children and families. Rather, it is a fluid and complex system, represented in the film by a staggering number of people – “House mates, friends, lovers, tricks, and even would-be competitors” forming a backdrop to the events and interviews (Hilderbrand 60). As Hilderbrand argues, such staging “may indicate a lack of personal domestic space for some of the subjects, but it also indicates a strong sense of community and kinship” (60). Therefore, a House does not necessarily function as an actual physical space – although one subject describes how Angie had once taken him in when he ran away from his parents, Livingston focuses on the ways in which members of the ballroom subculture populate public and semi-public spaces, such as bars, ballrooms and, most crucially, the streets. The street culture characteristic of city life, people from lower economic background and the margins of society, becomes crucial to the House, as it is where "family" is enacted more than anywhere else. Even more so than the obvious vocabulary used, this idea of the House underscores the idea of "family" not as a set of strictly defined and fixed elements (house, members and codes of conduct, to name a few), but precisely the internalized idea of family in the broadest of strokes (care, belonging, safety). As R.D. Laing explains it, "family" is, in essence, one's actual family modulated by one's memories, dreams and motivations, and then internalized (Laing 7). In other words, "family" equals family as a fantasy structure.

The fantastical part of the "family" in *Paris Is Burning* is communicated through its intertextual dialogue with mainstream culture, and specifically the family-oriented soap operas such as *Dynasty* and *All My Children*. The obsession of the film's subjects with this particular slice of popular culture can be understood as part of a greater proclivity of gay (queer) people's consumption and appropriation of mainstream culture that gets transformed, as David Halperin puts it, "into vehicles of gay meaning" as part of a larger "formation of gay male subjectivity" (Halperin 7). While Halperin focuses on the formation of specifically gay male identity in his book *How to Be Gay,* his discussion on the uses of camp, and one of his case studies in particular, the film *Mommie Dearest* (dir. Frank Perry, 1981), will prove especially helpful when it comes to exploring the relation between the (tele)visual culture and family as a fantasy structure.[4] The soap opera is, in a way, the perfect master narrative to consider in light of the previous two chapters, where on the one hand, I have discussed the verbally and physically explosive deconstruction of the American Dream in Edward Albee's family drama *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, which along with its film adaptation serves as dramatic context and spiritual predecessor to *The Boys in the Band*, and the genre of melodrama on the other, as a common, logical framework for the AIDS film and its emotional and bodily excesses, especially in the 1980s. The soap opera is a genre that is similarly focused on family, even though it is, in theory, primarily about romance. As Jennifer Hayward writes in her book, *Consuming Pleasures: Active Audiences and Serial Fictions from Dickens to Soap Opera*, "The historical timing of soaps' incredible popularity, which exploded in the postwar years as America became increasingly mobile and extended families increasingly fragmented, confirms the importance of the stable "family" provided by soap communities" (164). This fragmentation of the extended family is a phenomenon that Tom Scanlan also recognizes in light of its reduction into the nuclear family, resulting in "a concentration which intensifies those important social and psychological relations which still occur in the family" (Scanlan 18). As for the family becoming the central conflict of American drama, Scanlan locates it in the anxiety surrounding "contending family ideals." He continues, "We are at war with and dependent on these ideals. We strive for freedom and are appalled by loneliness; we reject family structure and yearn for its security" (4).

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[4] Another book that engages with the notions of camp, filmic icons and homosexual spectators, Richard Dyer's *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*, is of interest for further reading on this subject.

This is only a small part of the cultural history and meaning that Livingston broaches with her insistence on her subjects' yearning for the images presented on daytime serial television. The larger-than-life divas of soap operas (one of the most iconic, of course, being Joan Collins as *Dynasty*'s Alexis Carrington) provide models of dress and affectation that translate to the campy dramatics of both the Mothers and their protégés – consider Angie Xtravaganza's body language when receiving her award, or Venus' body language as she lounges on her bed when talking about wanting to be a "spoiled, rich, white girl living in the suburbs" (*Paris Is Burning*). In the latter sequence, Venus' icy demeanor is every bit as carefully constructed as Pamela Sue Martin's Fallon Carrington, the ultimate spoiled, rich, white girl, of *Dynasty* fame.[5] *Dynasty* is referenced at least three times in the film and is presented as an enormously influential show, along with *All My Children*. A featured interviewee in the film, performer Dorian Corey, recounts *Dynasty* becoming an actual category in the competition and directly refers to the characters of Alexis and Krystle when lamenting the declining popularity of Hollywood actresses such as Marlene Dietrich and Betty Grable among the performers. Crucially, the turn to television signifies a practice of watching and reenacting family through a medium that, as Hayward reminds us, has been influentially dubbed the "ideal mother" by theorist Tania Modleski, and a "fully socialized family member" by Jane Feuer, with Hayward herself adding that, as opposed to the grandeur and spectacle of film, television, and soap operas especially, fosters "cooperation, understanding, empathy, forgiveness […] qualities necessary for the interrelationships typically thought of as constituting the family" (J. Hayward 161).

Earlier in the film, Pepper LaBeija draws a connection between performing in balls to the desire to enact success as coded in being white, rich and famous. "Seeing the riches, seeing the way people on *Dynasty* lived, these huge houses. And I would think, 'These people have 42 rooms in their house! Oh, my God, what kind of a house is that?' And we've got three" (*Paris Is Burning*). A wish-fulfillment narrative, marked by opulence and contained within a house with forty-two rooms, *Dynasty* is only nominally about the romance between the characters, instead making good on the promise put forth by its title, and focusing on the issues of extended families, inheritance and family business as seen by the middle-class character of Krystle (Linda Evans) and, by extension, the audience. The intertext that the soap opera forms with *Paris Is Burning* roots the queer family as a fantasy structure in popular culture about and for families, and, in turn, illuminates the contemporaneous idea of the American Dream. For the subjects of *Paris Is Burning*, the ballroom scene becomes not only a place to perform opulence, but also to recontextualize their subjectivity, constructed in relation to popular culture, within their respective houses, or "families." Within the "family," the value system made up of success, fame and fortune can be reconfigured and, thus, attained in the form of ballroom trophies and the status as "legendary" figures of the ball scene.

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[5] For more on the problematic of race in terms of femininity and gender performativity in the film, see bell hooks' critical essay "Is Paris Burning?," as well as Judith Butler's piece titled "Gender Is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion" for a more detailed critique of the subversive power of drag as seen in the film. Rather than engage in detail with the issues raised in these seminal essays, I hope my piece, with its limited scope, registers as a minor contribution to the issues of kinship that both of these authors touch on.

Of course, the reality of the ballroom scene is far from the fantasies enacted on television. In other words, that Livingston's subjects find a way to mimic the privileges and successes that define white, straight America within the ballroom scene and their Houses, does not mean that that gap is erased. If anything, the film's last movement, structured around Venus' murder and the mainstreaming of *voguing*, a dance form that is a staple of ballroom culture as well as one of the categories in the competition, draws attention to the fact that the Children are no better off. While their form of expression may have been mainstreamed through the documentary's circulation, and the critical and popular response it received, they themselves have not moved from the margin. In a piece titled "Home, Houses, Nonidentity: *Paris Is Burning,*" Chandan C. Reddy speaks of the documentary genre's contradictory quality in the case of this film, as "the subjects of *Paris* seem to know precisely the paradox of their entry onto the screen [and have to] seize precisely the apparatus that constitutes their otherness to achieve representation" (368). In the same passage, he clarifies that the subjects circumvent objectification by "playing it up" for the cameras, explaining that, "Rather than accept a falsifying logic that suggests that representation can mimetically re-present social reality, they approach ‘social reality’ as a contradiction” (368). I see Reddy’s succinct and illuminating passage as an answer to an earlier problem in his chapter, where he makes the distinction between the ballroom circuit’s Houses and the home – a distinction that echoes the gap I perceive in the subjects’ engagement with popular culture.

> Put otherwise, the documentary subjects interviewed in Livingston’s film never replace the original home from which they were often brutally expelled with the “houses” of the ball circuit. The “houses” are, rather, the site from which to remember the constitutive violence of the home, and the location from which to perform the pleasures and demands of alternative living, while at the same time functioning as an “interlocutionary device” between homes and queer subjects. (Reddy 357)

Reddy’s idea of the House being a simulacrum for a home marked by pain and distress, deconstructing it without actually replacing it, is also reflected in Monica B. Pearl’s writing on queer filiation in the context of AIDS. Describing the literature of AIDS, she writes that, as much as they create a sense of domesticity, these filiations “also show its impossibility, that you cannot just adopt [domesticity] because you decide that is what is going to ameliorate the anguish of loss that even kinship and family could not stem” (145).

The recurrent understanding of “family” as a critical and discursive practice rather than a band aid for loneliness, as we’ve seen in the complex, often contradictory interactions in *The Boys in the Band*, and the ways in which the PWA disrupted and complicated familial and conjugal processes in *Parting Glances*, is present again in *Paris Is Burning*. If the gap between a home and a House is to be seen as a place where one’s pain and exclusion is lived through and re-created as well as reconciled, the particular context of *Paris Is Burning*, populated with sharp-tongued Mothers and Children, and laced with competitiveness and "reading," can be seen as providing an arena similar to the one David Halperin explores in his writing on camp. In *How to Be Gay,* he identifies the Joan Crawford biopic *Mommie Dearest*, and specifically the vicious titular character (played by Faye Dunaway in full melodramatic force), as having long-lasting popularity due to its use of camp as a strategy for confronting past familial trauma.

> If one of the functions of camp humor is to return to a scene of trauma and to replay that trauma on a ludicrously amplified scale, so as to drain it of the pain that camp does not deny, then the camp appropriation of these dramas of mother-daughter conflict might be thought to confront the fear that haunts many a gay boyhood and that leaves a traumatic residue in the inner lives of many gay adults: the fear that the adored mother might express – if only unawares, or despite herself – her unconquerable aversion to her offspring, her disgust at having begotten and raised a deviant child. (Halperin 224)

As such, camp is certainly present in *Paris Is Burning* as a subversion of and a deviation from the normative, unattainable models of family and home, while the pain that is the driving force behind the creation of the queer "family" is never left unacknowledged. Put differently, the gap between the home and the House, between the ball Children's social reality and the "family" as a fantasy structure, is negotiated through realizing and playing up the latter as a construct. Examples of this strategy include Angie Xtravaganza's lampooning of motherhood when she lasciviously "nurses" her Children in the street, or Pepper LaBeija's envy of the Children's youth and simultaneous advocacy of agency at an older age. Reading and deconstructing whiteness, opulence and the American dream through drag is a way of negotiating its absence while still acknowledging and even worshipping it as a point of reference. In his discussion of the House music genre (not to be confused with the Houses of the ball scene) and the community building implicit in its fan base, Brian Currid references the, for the purposes of this thesis very conveniently titled, Sister Sledge song "We Are Family," claiming that it exemplifies "the style in which 'we' imagine 'our' community is oh-so-much-more-fabulously stylish than imaginings made possible through the uncritical repetition of stodgy national anthems" (166). "Community" here is exchangeable with "family," especially in light of Currid's mention of the national anthem and the family's centrality in legitimizing one's existence as a full-fledged citizen. House music and the House as a social structure operate in a similar fashion, emulating the normative structures of community, family and homes. To quote Currid again,

> Community and family in House music appear in drag, and in so doing, to misquote Judith Butler, "constitute the mundane way in which [community] is … theatricalized, worn, and done; it implies that all [community] performance is a kind of impersonation and approximation." (Currid 166)

I would be remiss not to discuss another model implicit in the formation of "families" in *Paris Is Burning*, and the ballroom scene at large. I have already discussed the campy mannerisms of such outrageous characters as Faye Dunaway's *Mommie Dearest*, and the stereotypically dramatic, larger-than-life soap opera characters as some of the explicitly verbalized models for feminine emulation in *Paris Is Burning*. Indeed, it seems that such characters, fussy and caring at the same time, are a staple of the drag scene – one need not look further than the 1968 documentary *The Queen* for similar examples, where one of the organizers of a drag queen pageant likens himself to a "Jewish mother," and in which Bette Davis, another grand dame (and, like Joan Crawford, an icon of "hagsploitaiton" after their performances in

What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?) makes an appearance on a poster as the drag queens are applying make-up. Yet, the motherly and grotesque stock characters of the silver screen aside, there is a racial specificity to *Paris Is Burning* and its cast of people of color, and specifically African Americans, that evokes a tradition of alternative kinships that runs through African American history itself.

Much has been written on the importance of black kinship, an extended network of caregiving and support that redefined what family life meant for underprivileged people of color. In their study, "Kinship Relations in Black Extended Families," Linda M. Chatters, Robert Joseph Taylor and Rukmalie Jayakody trace this strategy of living back to the perilous days of slavery, where children were taught to call adults "Aunt" or "Uncle." This practice helped "socialize children into the slave community," as well as "bind unrelated individuals to each other through reciprocal fictive kinship relations" (Chatters et. al 298). The article proceeds to investigate the contemporary "fictive kinship" among people of color, specifically Puerto Ricans and African Americans, while harking back repeatedly to Elliot Liebow's seminal book, *Tally's Corner: A Study of Negro Streetcorner Men*, first published in 1967. In it, Liebow described the street corner as Laing would describe "family" – "[a man's] personal community, then, is not a bounded area but rather a web-like arrangement of man-man and man-woman relationships, [each of whom] has his own personal social network" (Liebow 105-4). This internalized mode of relationality, transcending its location and sometimes even its constituents, leaves one with an internalized idea of friends and family that, in Liebow's case, are often interchangeable – as Chatters and others point out, Liebow introduces a whole host of familial words to describe the networks of pseudo-kinship that emerge on the street. Relationships based on the concepts of "families," "cousins," or "(going for) brothers" form a particular social safety net in times and situations where "group members assist each other during personal crises such as episodic poverty, injury, illness, or death" (Chatters et. al 300).

Paris Is Burning is interspersed with a series of short interviews with two young boys who spend their time on the streets of Manhattan in one of many examples where "family" is acknowledged and reproduced through language. In his attempt to explain what a House is, one of them, a fifteen-year-old orphan, says,

> They treat each other like sisters and sisters. Or brothers, or mothers, or… You know, like, I say, "Oh, that's my sister." Because she's gay too, and I'm gay, and she's a drag queen or whatever." (*Paris Is Burning*)

The way a House works, in this case, echoes the tradition of "peer group-based fictive kin relations" that have been observed in the African American milieu, and especially in that milieu's street culture, where "'going for brothers' represented a special case of friendship in which the usual obligations, expectations, and loyalties of the friend relationship were publicly declared to be at their maximum" (Chatters et. al 300, 301). As Willi Ninja, the Mother of the House of Ninja, explained on the Joan Rivers show at the time of the film's release, "Some houses are like a close-knit family, they do look after each other, they stick together. If they're in a club and one is in trouble, then that House is behind them" ("The Joan Rivers Show/Episode 194"). Not only do Ninja's words underline the "personal crisis" Chatters and others identify as a point where groups unite as "families," but, through the mention of club culture, they also draw attention to the communal, public, street-located quality of these groupings that Liebow himself wrote about back in 1967, and that is at the core of *Paris Is Burning*.

A film that is regularly referenced in relation to *Paris Is Burning*, Alek Keshishian's *Madonna: Truth or Dare*, is in many ways another one about "family," and as such, a logical companion piece to Livingston's documentary. The 1991 film follows Madonna on her Blond Ambition world tour, providing an insight into her life and work while on the road, and punctuating its black and white, cinéma-vérité-style footage with flashily edited, color sequences of concert performances. While the film's most obvious context is the so-called "rockumentary" canon, I would argue that, due to its heavy reliance on the relationship between Madonna and her dancers as a source of conflict, character development and, most importantly, the construction of Madonna's public persona, it is a film that is deeply rooted in the idea of fictive kinship. The connection between the Madonna documentary and *Paris Is Burning* is most visibly rooted in her mainstreaming of *voguing* through her hit song "Vogue," introducing through appropriation the dance form's aesthetic and meaning to the global audience. The film also features a cameo by dancer and choreographer José Xtravaganza, an instrumental figure in the creation and staging of the music video for "Vogue." Furthermore, as Hilderbrand notes, the connection between the two films was established as early as August 1991, when Madonna attended the premiere of *Paris Is Burning* in a move that was possibly orchestrated in order to create marketing buzz, due to both films being distributed by Miramax (Hilderbrand 114).

Hilderbrand singles out the finale of the Blonde Ambition tour, and by extension *Truth or Dare*, the performance of Sly & the Family Stone's "Family Affair" and Madonna's own "Keep It Together," as a moment when Keshishian's film appropriates "the language of the ball scene" and "[stages] the concept of an alternative queer and interracial family to a broad audience, and Madonna refers to herself as a 'mother' to her dancers" (97). In truth, the alternative queer "family" forms the backbone of the film, as it negotiates Madonna as a private person in relation to her biological family, and Madonna as a musician, with her troupe of dancers constituting her "family." On the one hand, Madonna's relationship with her parents and siblings, and her past as a whole, is marked by obligation and misunderstanding. She continuously bickers with her father over the sexually explicit parts of the show, claiming that he doesn't understand her art; the appearance of her brother Marty happens in the wake of her "outing" him as an alcoholic in front of the camera, and his inability to visit her on time is met with a cold shoulder; even the visit to her mother's grave, where she famously turns to the camera and utters, "I'm going to fit in right here. They're going to bury me sideways," (*Madonna: Truth or Dare*) is played up to the camera as a melodramatic performance rather than an honest portrayal of mourning. In turn, the film redefines Madonna's subjectivity and interpersonal relationships as emerging completely from her workplace, as she insists on relating, bickering and cuddling with her dancers to the point where even her boyfriend at the time, Warren Beatty, appears in only a couple of perfunctory scenes. The "Family Affair" / "Keep It Together" medley that closes both the show and the film synthesizes the idea of a performing collective as a "family," echoing Laing's theorization of transference of the familial structure to the workplace and relating to employees and co-workers from an internalized idea of kinship. Furthermore, the artificiality of the film, rooted in Madonna's knowing construction of the false "reality" of pop stardom, draws attention to the fact that, like her transitory kinship with her dancers (the film opens and closes with images of mourning the show coming to an end, and, by extension, the death of the troupe's "family"), the biological relations are just as much a construct in their own right.

In her text, "The Powers of Seeing and Being Seen: *Truth or Dare* and *Paris Is Burning*," Ann Cvetkovich makes a connection between the two films in the context of drag performance. Cvetkovich refers to some of Madonna's many reproductions of cultural texts, such as Marilyn Monroe's performance in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, James Acheson's costume design for Stephen Frier's *Dangerous Liaisons*, and Horst P. Horst's photographs, in order to illustrate that, like the members of the ball circuit, Madonna relies on her performances to create fantasies rather than realities. Cvetkovich states that, "Madonna's performances are perhaps best understood on the model of gay male drag, which opens up a distinction between being a woman and performing as a woman" (157). If we are to consider *Truth or Dare* itself as another performance, with Madonna positioning herself as a temperamental employer, but also the "mother" to her dancers, or "babies," both gay and straight, and expressing interest in their personal lives marked by disenfranchisement from their own families and the society at large, her pastiche of motherhood parallels that of Angie Xtravaganza. Like *Paris Is Burning*, *Truth or Dare* trades in fantasy and appropriates the vocabulary and understanding of familial life in order to provide a space for the marginalized, both on the screen and in the audience, to achieve, as Hilderbrand puts it, "the dream of crossover success and a degree of fame" (98), even though in this case, the commercial machine of pop culture reaps the most benefits.

The final sentence of Hilderbrand's book on *Paris Is Burning* reads, "The cultural work this documentary has done in the world transcends the film and its filmmaker by offering models of queer world-making" (146). This statement echoes his earlier claim that what the film is about, at its core, are the "queer strategies of living," and my own understanding of the film as not only one where the queer "family" is most obviously enacted, but also one that is part of a body of queer cinema that models the "queer world-making" on family structures. A very particular and intriguing version of this dynamic is, perhaps unsurprisingly, introduced in *Paris Is Burning*, considering its conflation of opulence and family. When, early in the film, Pepper Labeija describes his twenty-year presence on the ballroom scene as "reigning," he is evoking the spirit of competition that demarcates this milieu. However, his choice of words also sets up the film as implicitly being about "legendary" Houses as dynasties, families that are reproduced through a succession of House Mothers and their successful children. The idea of the community's reproduction through succession raises the stakes of the film, and when Hilderbrand claims that what makes the film tragic is "that Venus was murdered, that so many of the other ball children struggle to live, and that almost all of the film's leading subjects have died young in the intervening two decades since the film was completed" (146), it is difficult not to think of *Paris Is Burning* as a document of a "family" collapsing.

Yet, the Houses are still around. In a move that eerily echoes Octavia St. Laurent's struggles and dreams of becoming a transgendered model in *Paris Is Burning*, a recent fashion campaign for the luxury department store Barneys New York featured a number of young transgender people in a Bruce Weber-directed photo-shoot and short film, and among them one of the current Mothers of the House of Xtravaganza, Gisele Xtravaganza. In an accompanying piece published by Barneys, Gisele talks about the continued legacy of the House of Xtravaganza, and specifically her role as a Mother, in the following way:

> Today members at Xtravaganza are mostly African-American and Latino LGBTQ men and women, as well as a great many transgendered kids from all over who have been abandoned by their parents or thrown out of their homes by relatives who are homophobic and are struggling to survive. These kids are taken in by me and others—we call ourselves mothers or fathers. (Braddock, "Brothers, Sisters, Sons & Daughters: Meet Gisele")

While Gisele speaks of the enduring legacy of the House, and especially its role as a safe haven for transgendered children, it is interesting to note that, even though the projects name, *Brothers, Sisters, Sons & Daughters*, mimics the vocabulary of *Paris Is Burning*, the short film that features these transgender models points back to the biological family as the ultimate support system. The film includes interviews with a large number of young transgender models, some amateur and some professional, while they explain the emotional confusion and anguish they have faced, the common misconceptions about transgendered folk, and their processes of transitioning. A number of them, including Gisele, are joined by their parents or other supportive family members, and the film elicits an emotional response specifically from these scenes in an acknowledgment of the trans community's difficult history. Caretaking and emotional support remain under the umbrella of family – either biological or, as was the case in *Paris Is Burning* and its legendary Houses, simply logical.

Conclusion

Keeping Up with Queer "Families"

As Lucas Hilderbrand notes, the footage that closes *Paris Is Burning* and is intercut with the credits, is that of performer Chipper Corey, in the film's only instance where an actual star is impersonated. The star is Patti LaBelle, and Corey is lip-syncing to LaBelle's version of the song "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." Hilderbrand notes that the choice to end the film with this performance "suggests that the balls *are* somewhere over the rainbow for the queer men and women of color in this film" (87). In the context of the song, I would like to offer my own reading. The evocation of the famous Judy Garland number from the classic Hollywood musical *The Wizard of Oz* (dir. Victor Fleming, 1939) is, in fact, the evocation of family as situated in one of the most legendary images of American cinema. Before Dorothy leaves for Oz, she sings this song in the sepia-colored farmland of Kansas, hoping that her life adventures will lead her to a more exciting place where her sensitivities will be better understood. The irony, of course, is that *The Wizard of Oz* is about the return to one's country and the biological family one is bound to. After visiting the Technicolor Land of Oz, Dorothy, dressed in the colors of the American flag, comes to the understanding that, "There's no place like home" (*The Wizard of Oz)*, and is forced to reevaluate her life in Kansas and the people around her with the realization that, in spite of her eccentricities, her family is where she ultimately belongs.

The there-and-back-again structure of the film recasts the yearning for an alternative environment located "somewhere over the rainbow" as a misguided one. Yet, the hopefulness of the song trumps this idea for the queer community that embraced it as an anthem, as for many of them, there is no going back. The presence of the song in *Paris Is Burning* underscores this look towards the future and the necessary hopefulness it implies, but still remains an enactment of a fantasy. The balls as fantasy spaces may indeed be “somewhere over the rainbow,” as Hilderbrand claims, but the performers are left negotiating the space in-between. It is in this space, neither over the rainbow nor back at home, that the queer “family” is situated.

The queer “family,” in its state of in-betweenness, is a productive space of empowerment where the American Dream and the American reality are negotiated. As I have demonstrated, it is marked by such processes as parrhesia, caregiving and transference of one mode of living and thinking onto another. In this space, members of the “family” engage in caregiving, resentment, physical and emotional intimacy, and competition. Most importantly, “family” is a site where trauma is negotiated through reenactment and fantasy, engaging with cultural master narratives and situating itself within these parameters through appropriation, pastiche and parody.

As the legal and social status of queer people changed, so has the conception of family. The dynamics of the “family,” fluid and prone to change due to its members’ location on the margins of society, began to normalize as the margin inched toward the center. For example, the filmic and televisual output of the 1990s, and the trend of constructing narratives around single women and their gay best friends that I touched on in my introduction, normalized the figure of the gay man as a masculine hunk who is either a live-in fantasy for the single woman’s Mr. Right, or someone whose purpose is to actively help her get married, or both. Even within narratives that focus specifically on gay people, the favored relationship model has become that of two people in what Roach and Foucault would call “the lovers’ fusion of identities” (Roach 46), with the other easily manageable model of queer behavior, the anonymous hook-up, also present as titillation and an obstacle to conjugal bliss. In the light of greater acceptance of sexual minorities in the new century, the “family” has been mainstreamed into the family, a nominally tolerant, and undoubtedly enjoyable structure, but one marked by "the privatization of the social relationship we depend on to survive" (Nair 20), and perpetuated by the media as the only legitimizing social formation.

In spite of their somewhat regressive ideas of the ways in which the queer and the familial can intersect, I do find the "gay best friend" narratives to be of interest when it comes to the legacy of queer "families." These melodramatic works are reminiscent of Waugh's theorization of melodrama as a genre that unites women and gay men in its inclination to distrust and negotiate patriarchy (Waugh 123). While this trust is almost universally restored through the female's character "happily ever after" with a Mr. Right, and the idea that the bond between a woman and her gay best friend could ever replace heterosexual conjugality is abandoned, these films still unwittingly position heterosexual conjugality as a fantasy and a construct to be criticized, if only temporarily. This is a characteristic they share with films of the 1970s and 1980s, but they differ in that the order is restored, usually signified by the woman getting married or entering into a relationship, with little mention of what happens to the gay best friend. *The Next Best Thing* and *The Object of My Affection* are particularly opportune examples of this last point, in that both are about a woman embracing motherhood and normalcy through a re-enactment of family life with her best friend, and then achieving it by finding a partner, whereas the character of the gay best friend is relegated to a side role, and never seen achieving his own happiness. It is worth noting that the more progressive of these narratives, like the television show *Will & Grace*, see the gay character himself normalized within a family unit, through conjugality and even a child as the focus of the "marriage" to a gay partner. Gay families are reenacted most readily on television, as it remains the medium that is most closely associated with domesticity and familial life. Even the recent high-profile transition of Olympian and reality television star Caitlyn Jenner (formally Bruce), of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* fame, has been framed within the context of family, with the Kardashians and Jenners' reactions to Caitlyn's new public identity making up the bulk of the media reports surrounding her transition.

Monica B. Pearl writes that "there is no ritual for queer kinship – it is forged organically, over time, and does not seek sanction" (149). Originally, this was the main methodological problem that I encountered when researching for this thesis, as the "family" was difficult to define and recognize. However, the visual and narrative tropes of "family" in queer cinema that I located as meaningful could, I believe, provide a point of entry into the canon from a perspective that circumvents prescribed modes of gay relationality. Put differently, the "family" is both actualized and observable in these rituals and tropes. On the one hand, these tropes can be dramatic, as seen in the domestic mise-en-scène in William Friedkin's *The Boys in the Band* and the film's appropriation of the trope of the family reunion, or the way "family" is quite literally staged in Alek Keshishian's *Madonna: Truth or Dare*. Secondly, the "family" is reenacted through behavior, exemplified through the tropes of caregiving and mourning in melodramatic AIDS narratives such as Bill Sherwood's *Parting Glances.* Finally, the dramatics and gestures of family are defined by language, as is the case in Jennie Livingston's *Paris Is Burning*, where familial rituals are reproduced in a constellation of Houses, Mothers and Children.

The "family," identifiable through these tropes, holds the potential of problematizing the queer canon through a host of conflicting and discursively rich models of relationality it offers. It is my hope that, through my diverse case studies, I have demonstrated the potential of approaching queer cinema with the understanding of how family can be internalized, transferred and re-invented into a "family" – a construct that emulates familial ties while challenging and complicating the family ideal as central to heternormativity, patriarchy and citizenship.

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