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MAPPING THE EPHEMERAL COMMUNITY IN LARRY KRAMER'S *FAGGOTS* AND ANDREW HOLLERAN'S *DANCER FROM THE DANCE*

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"There are 2,556,596 faggots in the New York City area. The largest number, 983,919, live in Manhattan. 186,991 live in Queens, or just across the river. 181,236 live in Brooklyn and 180,009 live in the Bronx. 2,469 live on Staten Island" (Kramer 3). These lines opening Larry Kramer's 1978 novel *Faggots* construct a virtual map of New York's boroughs in the early 1970s, explicitly creating the impression of the city as a 'gay metropolis'. While at first glance, this map apparently delineates queer spaces in New York,¹ at second glance, one cannot be so sure; the satirical exaggeration of these impossibly precise numbers deconstructs the idea that such an accurate mapping of the gay community is possible. The exactness of the claim is further undermined by the fact that the individual numbers do not add up to the total amount stated, and that later in the novel, a different overall sum is quoted.²

I take the beginning of *Faggots* as a starting point, because it illustrates the difficulty of trying to grasp, let alone precisely map, something as elusive and ambiguous as queer space. Despite its evasiveness, the concept of queer space has incited a number of scholars over the last two decades to explore this slippery construct time and again, sometimes to pinpoint its characteristics, sometimes to deconstruct it, but always with the aim to use it productively despite or specifically because it resists a precise definition. In this essay, I will show that queer space is of inter-

est not only to spatial theorists, but also to literary and cultural scholars. In particular, fictional gay narratives from the late 1970s can be productively explored using the concept of queer space to provide insightful readings of narrative representations of New York's gay community. Accordingly, I will argue that the concept of queer space (rather than gay space) proves useful for these works in three ways: it highlights the challenge the narratives posit to heteronormatively produced spaces; it foregrounds spaces as discursively produced rather than as solid geographical locations; and it reveals the gay community itself to be a fluctuating entity with its own mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion.

QUEER SPACE: AN INTANGIBLE CONCEPT

One characteristic of queer spaces, which has by now almost become a truism, is that, generally, they are urban spaces. In his 1983 publication *Sexual Politics; Sexual Communities*, John D'Emilio positions the city as an inherently queer space when he links the development of gay and lesbian identities to capitalism. D'Emilio states that "the interlocking processes of urbanization and industrialization created a social context in which an autonomous personal life could develop" (11), including sexual interests. Consequently, he argues, LGBTQ* (an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer identities, with the asterisk representing a wildcard for other non-heteronormative identities) people were increasingly attracted to large cities, where they could find an environment that offered them anonymity, on the one hand, and the opportunity to meet other LGBTQ* persons, on the other (12). In *Queer Constellations*, Diane Chisholm likewise views queer space as largely urban. Nevertheless, she differentiates between what she calls the queer city and queer space. She observes that "[t]he emergence of the 'queer city' in urban history derives primarily from representations of lesbian and gay hustling and cruising sites and their increasing notoriety (citability) in public space over time" (17; my emphasis). However, she advocates an understanding of queer *space* per se as a more fluid construction, produced, for example, during riots and pride marches that temporarily take over a certain space and subvert its normative character (10).

Responding to queer space's intangibility, an increasing number of scholars have advanced differentiated analyses and careful deconstructions of queer space. For example, in *Mapping Desire* (1995), David Bell and Gill Valentine observe that a crucial effect of the production of queer space is that it "forces people to realise [...] that the spaces around them, [...] the city streets, the malls and the motels, have been *produced* as (ambiently) heterosexual, heterosexist, and heteronormative" (16; italics in original), rather than their being 'naturally' so. Similarly, in "Cities, Queer Space, and the Cosmopolitan Tourist" (2002), Dereka Rushbrook argues for the necessity to challenge the notion of "coherence and homogeneity," which terms like 'gay space' or 'queer space' imply, consequently obscuring internal divisions within the community (203).

In contrast to the careful conceptualizations of space cited above, texts that do not have a specific spatial focus tend to represent queer spaces as graspable and homogenous environments. Especially retrospective glances at the Stonewall riots at the end of the 1960s and Gay Liberation in the 1970s tend to emphasize the significance of gay bars, bath houses, and other places that can be found on maps. The citability (and 'sitability', if you will) of these places insinuates permanence and stability. These ideas, in turn, link up with the specific narratives of Stonewall and Gay Liberation. Both are regularly seen as milestone events during which the gay community *collectively* came out of the closet, fought against police violence and discrimination, refused to hide any longer, and established a presence in the city. The spatially concrete concept of the 'ghetto' is still evoked in more recent works, in sentences such as "[a]mong the many businesses that defined a 'gay ghetto' probably the bars, baths, and bookstores have been most central" (Knauer 133) and "[o]ften figured as refuges for LGBTQ people, gay ghettos serve as home for many queers who have migrated to large urban areas in search of greater freedom of self-expression" (Meem, Gibson, and Alexander 411–412). Although contemporary publications are careful to emphasize the LGBTQ* community's diversity in terms of race, class, political goals, etc., examples such as the ones presented above suggest homogeneity. Particularly the 1960s and 1970s tend to be associated with a unified community that occupied specific urban queer spaces and thus became vis-

ible.

However, I will demonstrate that while a growing (political) presence and an awareness of belonging to a community were no doubt central to this time period in the U.S., gay fictional narratives from that time counter representations of queer space as fixed and/or homogenous. I will focus on two novels, both classics of gay literature: Larry Kramer's *Faggots* and Andrew Holleran's *Dancer from the Dance*. Both works were published in 1978, and both undertake to map the gay community of New York. The narratives often present readers with images of homogeneity, but they also complicate the ideas of an easily graspable gay community and stable queer spaces in the city. The novels illustrate the almost paradoxical simultaneous existence of New York as a queer city (for example through the inclusion of locations verifiable on maps) and an inherent instability of queer spaces, depicting a community that is in many ways characterized by mobility and ephemerality, and whose presence reveals the precariousness of spatial constructions, such as the boundary between public and private spaces. In fact, the protagonists' gay urban lifestyle is positioned as particularly capable of queering space and resisting heteronormativity.³ In this way, *Faggots* and *Dancer from the Dance* present images of homogeneity and images of a disparate and erratic community as concurrent, by at once emphasizing unity and the importance of collective action, and at the same time providing a critical lens that intermittently zooms in on the divisions and exclusions (racism, ageism, classism) that mark the cruising scene of New York in the 1970s.

QUEER SPACE: THE MAPPABLE VS. THE EPHEMERAL

Both narratives follow their gay protagonists as they navigate different clubs, parties, cruising areas, gyms, and bathhouses, 'mapping' New York as a queer city. This queer city is separate from the 'outside' world. In *Dancer from the Dance*, gay men who come to New York are said to vanish from their families' lives more easily than if they would have "vanish[ed] in the jungles of Sumatra" (34). Gay life is located in New York, whereas heterosexual family life is relegated to "that inscrutable past West of the Hudson" (236). The city not only harbors gay life, it be-

comes a symbol for gay life, which is described as a long series of cruising and dancing, cut off from “regular” life cycles. Similarly, the city itself is set apart from “natural” life cycles. Thus, “[i]n the city, nothing changes: It becomes cold part of the year, and hot another, but no trees lose their leaves, no crops ripen, there are only the streets, the fire escapes, the sky” (131). The city, described as barren in the quotation, seems to stand for stagnation. Yet in other instances, a symbiosis of gay life and city life, and the intimate knowledge the gay men have of ‘their’ city, proposes a progress-narrative for the gay community from invisibility to visibility that goes hand in hand with growing political power. Particularly *Faggots* at times appears to be a narrative of coming into power—which can be seen, for example, in a comment the protagonist, Fred Lemish, makes to his friend Abe:

Abe, New York is becoming Boys’ Town. You don’t know how many faggots⁴ parade up and down the streets, inhabit the clubs and bars and baths and discos and shop the stores and cruise the men’s rooms of hotels and universities and bookstores and subways and how many tens of thousands go to Fire Island and the Hamptons and Jones Beach and Riis Park and yes, there exist approximately seventy-two places where I can go any evening, or afternoon for that matter, where I can engage in physical activity leading to orgasm [...]. Seventy-two places I personally know about, which means there are many more that others know about but I yet don’t. And I also know that I am not seeing the same faces over and over again, that I am seeing strangers and that they are increasing into armylike proportions. And this information, [...] put to proper use[,] could probably elect a president [...] . (37–38)

Passages such as this one support the idea that New York contains a unified community that is not only claiming different spaces in and around the city but is also growing in size and political power every day. The “clubs and bars and baths and discos” are typical signifiers of the “gay ghetto” and the repetition of the conjunction “and” in the list of places creates an impression of breathlessness that puts a particular emphasis on the number and variety of specific places or kinds of places Fred can name.

Whereas *Faggots* renders New York as a gay metropolis that collectively pushes against heteronormative life, *Dancer from the Dance* tends to emphasize the overlap of queer and hetero-

sexually constructed spaces. In this way, *Dancer from the Dance* includes passages that explicitly deemphasize fixed places and foreground perpetual motion instead. Malone, one of the novel's main characters, is constantly travelling through the city:

He made love in deserted warehouses at three in the afternoon, and on piers along the river, with huge patches of sunlight falling through the ruined roof; he made love at night in curious apartments high above the city. He made love at rush hour in the men's rooms of subway stations [...]. He hurried back and forth across the city on the subway, on its sidewalks, rushing only on errands of love. (127)

Very fittingly for a city narrative, Malone here appears as a contemporary incarnation of the *flâneur* as an "idler or waster" who "seeks to succumb to the pull of random desires" (Featherstone 913) and follows them from place to place. He rushes "only on errands of love," which makes his idleness stand out in stark opposition to "rush hour," filled with commuters whose haste is dictated by their work schedule.

Yet, Malone's *flânerie* happens in the same spaces that the rush hour commuters occupy, and the places he visits are not described as inherently or permanently queer, but as spaces that are queered through the temporary presence of men meeting each other and having sex. Moreover, some of these places—warehouses, piers, and men's rooms in subway stations—also highlight the precariousness of the boundary between public and private space that the gay characters have to negotiate. As Ralph Poole has argued, the seemingly clear divide between public spaces as spaces that are freely accessible and private spaces as protected, not freely accessible spaces, is not all that clear when it comes to sex between men (139). Poole observes that the public toilet, the *tearoom*, embodies a "notorious instability because it is a space that lies between the private and the public" (135).⁵ A similar claim can be made for other spaces, such as the warehouses and piers that Malone visits. Their instability results from their conflicting functions. Their public function as heterosexual, productive places of work overlaps and clashes with their private function as places of pleasure and intimacy in which gay men meet to have sex. This also creates and opposition of 'unproductive' pleasure and economic capitalist productivity.

Transitory moments of intimacy can produce spaces as private (Poole 141), but public places may also become private, for example, through specific knowledge about the location of places where one can have sex, which is shared only by a limited number of people. In *Faggots*, Fred boasts of this kind of knowledge when he tells Abe that he knows seventy-two places where he can go and have sex. This gay network can also be seen in *Dancer* where gay men share coded information about public meeting points for sex. When Malone asks some men on the street in his neighborhood where he could go “to get some air,” they tell him about a park where men meet to have sex, understanding the hidden meaning of Malone’s question. Yet they also phrase their information as a warning:

[W]e told him of [...] our own watering hole, those two symmetrical parks on Second Avenue between Fifteenth and Seventeenth Streets, where we went in the evening to sit and smoke a cigarette and watch men have sex under the trees, and which we warned him was now patronized by homosexuals. (Holleran 135)

Such ‘maps’ oscillate between the ‘citable’ and the ephemeral, as only certain people share knowledge of them. Of course, such shared inside knowledge strengthens the image of a unified community that distinguishes itself from those on the outside who do not partake of the knowledge. And yet, on the other hand, it is important to note that many of the places or signals are temporary or specific to a certain context even within the community. Fred Lemish reveals how instable even those codes are, when he admits that “on certain streets on certain days at certain times the code might be slightly altered if you knew certain people” (33).

The gay man as the re-incarnation of the *flâneur* is also echoed in a Ginsbergian “Ode to These Streets,” which Anthony Montano, a character in *Faggots*, composes in his head:

Ah the streets, the Streets, *the streets*, let us pause for an Ode to The Streets, Gay Ghetto, homo away from home, the hierarchy and ritual of The Streets, incessant, insinuation, impossible *Streets*, addictive, the herb superb, can’t keep away from you, always drawn to you STREETS, speak of them singularly in the plural, [...] blending,

coalescing, oozing, all into one, all for us, how dramatic, how important, how depressing, fucking loneliness of walking alone and looking, displaying, on the streets—where so much time is spent, summer and winter, cold and HOT, You Can't Go Home Again, anyway you can't go home, who wants to go home [...] walk The Streets: Christopher Washington Greenwich Hudson West and Sheridan Square, such a parade [...]. (Kramer 68; capitals in original)

The rhythm of the words drives the passage forward, like the persistent movement of roaming the streets, which function as a substitute for a “home” to which one cannot return. These streets, collective, anonymous, are characterized as fluid, “blending, coalescing, oozing,” and at the same time this indistinctness is countered by the naming of specific street names—“Christopher Washington Greenwich Hudson West and Sheridan Square”—where gay men walk. The passage not only echoes Malone’s wanderings through New York’s streets in *Dancer from the Dance*, but it also conveys the oscillation of queer spaces between the aggregate states of solid and liquid, between permanence and transience. In this way, these scenes illustrate how both novels portray the gay cruising scene in New York as a space of the gay community, signifying visibility and potential for political action, but simultaneously emphasizing the centrality of queer spaces in the city that are fluid and non-permanent. Consequently, the boundaries between categories such as queer, gay, and heteronormative are portrayed as precarious and fluctuating.

This non-permanent and migratory quality of queer space is also exemplified in the perpetual opening and closing of clubs throughout New York and the annual migration of the gay party scene to Fire Island in the summer and back to the city in the fall. Queer spaces are constantly sought, produced, and abandoned, but most importantly they are shown to exist not outside of but within the intricate network of political and economic contexts of heteronormative society. In this way, sometimes gay clubs are forcibly closed, for example by the “most homophobic of all city agencies” (the Fire Department, that is) (Kramer 25), and sometimes, as the unnamed protagonist of *Dancer from the Dance* relates, the gay community felt it

had to abandon places when they became too professional, too know-

ing, too slick. Places we had loved—such as the dive off Times Square we often saw Malone in—were written about in *New York* magazine, *Newsweek* and *GQ* and then, the final stage of death, we would pass their doors one evening and see, where we had once thronged to begin those ecstatic rites of Dionysus, a mob of teen-agers and couples from Queens whose place it was now. And so we would go out to [...] this obscure bar in Queens, or Jersey City [...]. (Holleran 116)

On the one hand, this passage underscores a dichotomy between queer space and heteronormative space; on the other, it suggests that neither of the two is 'naturally' stable or permanent. Streets that are usually "completely deserted at night," can suddenly, on a Friday or Saturday night, attract "flotillas of taxis [that] would pull up to a certain dim doorway and deliver the passengers, who, on showing a numbered card, would go up in a freight elevator to the twelfth floor" (Holleran 37-38). Or a mob of gay men "thousands strong" might block West 14th Street when a new club opens, "waving tickets in the air, pushing toward that tiny door" while "[m]ounted policemen [are] trying their proudly perched best to keep the streets clear" (Kramer 206). The passage highlights that 'unmarked' heteronormative space can become queer space in a matter of minutes, illustrating Michel de Certeau's observation that space is always a result of the activities taking place in it. It also underlines that the heightened visibility of queer spaces, which puts the community as such on the map, leads to increased surveillance in some cases, and to (heterosexual) commodification of such spaces in others, both of which threaten to eradicate them. Indeed, the characters' rejection of places that become too "public" or "too slick" emphasizes their association with *queer* spaces that stand in opposition to commodification and bourgeois establishment. In this way, the narratives are associated with "the ideal of perverse sexual pleasure" (Crimp 11)—which would become a political statement against the homophobic backlash during the AIDS crisis—rather than with equal rights struggles of a gay or LGBTQ* community.

DIVISIONS AND EXCLUSIONS IN THE GAY COMMUNITY

Time and again, impressions of a collective opposition of the

'gay world' to the heteronormative outside world suggested by the larger narrative strands are interrupted by inconspicuous moments that reveal the divisions and exclusions that characterize the gay community. In the gay baths, for example, divisions are based on age and attractiveness. When Fred Lemish enters the baths late at night, he describes the scene:

Earlier arrivals, the younger ones at any rate, in good physical shape and desirable, would by now have ejaculated in some manner or other, approximately three to six times, while older soldiers, passing thin-walled moans and groans, would by now have received approximately forty-nine rejections as they heaved pasty white frames from cubicle to cubicle, reached out exploratory fingers of hope to inhospitable cocks, listened for anticipated 'I don't think so's, 'Get out's, or more polite 'I'm resting's, and, eventually, exhaustion being the better part of their valor, settling for one of their own kind, taking ten minutes to get an erection and two seconds to come, then grabbing their clothes and heading home. (Kramer 156–157)

Even though older men technically share the same space with the younger men in the baths, a clear age division segregates older visitors from younger ones. Older men are categorically described as unattractive, "pasty" and heavy, and their stay is described as a string of defeats, anticipated to boot. Finally, as if they were a different species that has nothing in common with the young desirable men who are in physically good shape, they have to settle for "one of their own kind" and leave.

The summer community on Fire Island features similar divisions based on age and disposable income. Whereas the Pines are the "newer, classier, and more expensive" community that "has better shops and handsomer, younger, more affluent fellows, and bigger houses," Cherry Grove is where the calmer, less stylish and older part of the community settles for the summer (Kramer 266). Moreover, there are poorer gay men for whom Fire Island, as well as the more expensive clubs in New York, seem "like Paris," as "they represented nice spots to visit . . . someday" (96). These facts are often introduced only parenthetically, but they are nevertheless included and their presence complicates clear-cut definitions of queer space. Apart from the often transitory nature of the queer spaces themselves, it turns out, time and

again, that access to them can be quite restricted. Such spaces are not automatically accessible to all LGBTQ* persons, and not all who enter are able to use the spaces in the same way.

In *Faggots*, the character of Yootha Truth, a black gay man who hustles the streets, gives readers a glimpse of a different aspect of gay life in New York. He is described as “clutching his ratty fur coat to his thin black body as if it were December, which, for Yootha, who ha[d] not eaten in several days, it was” (93). He can no longer turn tricks on Forty-Second Street because “a civic clean-up has been undertaken” (93). Likewise, he cannot go to the bathrooms at Bloomingdale’s because his looks are too shabby, and his only other option is trying to find a customer in “the public lavatories” which, however, disgusts him (94). An acquaintance he meets on the street is sympathetic, but answers, “You’re too skinny, dear. Blacks are now acceptable as sex partners but your competition grows fiercer as your people push themselves into uppity mobility” (93). Once again, this scene is marginal to the main plot, but it reveals a very casual racism that highlights problematic divisions in the gay community. While the more contested and more dangerous public spaces are accessible to Yootha, the more private and ‘safer’ spaces, such as Bloomingdale’s or clubs, are (at least at this point) not. In addition to revealing racism within the gay community, this short scene underlines the significance of class. Despite a certain fluidity of boundaries between private and public spaces, not all queer spaces are equally accessible or equally safe. Spaces such as public restrooms are very different queer spaces than clubs where one enters by showing a numbered card (Holleran 37–38). In fact, Yootha’s example demonstrates that poor LGBTQ* persons are often the ones relegated to transitory queer spaces on the boundary of public and private, where, however, they risk being arrested, threatened, or hurt. The observation is not new to scholars in queer studies; Poole for example points to the “criminalization” and health risk of such places (276). My point here, however, is that these literary works from the 1970s already diagnosed many of the characteristics of queer spaces that scholars would theorize in the decades that would follow—a queer theory *avant la lettre*.

CONCLUSION

In some ways, and not least through their own restricted focus on a white, middle-class, sex-positive environment, the novels *Faggots* and *Dancer from the Dance* claim urban queer space as room for a growing cohesive unit and New York as the queer space par excellence. This aspect becomes evident when Fred Lemish exclaims, “There’s millions of me now [...]. All the closets are empty. New York has no more full closets. Please let’s be brave, bold pioneers!” (Kramer 35). But alongside the image of a united gay community that increasingly claims space for itself, the narratives reveal instances of instability, division, mobility and ephemerality that characterize the gay community and queer spaces alike. The novels’ portrayal of such spaces also complicates presumably ‘clear’ boundaries between private and public spaces pointing to a more radical questioning of spatial constructions in general and of the different powers that contest them, many of them economic in nature.

Faggots and *Dancer from the Dance* introduce a complex perspective on queer spaces. On the one hand, they portray such transitory spaces and spaces which resist commodification as desirable, since they afford “the ideal of perverse sexual pleasure” (Crimp 11) free from heteronormative constraints. On the other hand, the books reveal queer spaces as risky and unsafe places largely occupied by persons with little to no disposable income. In this way, *Faggots* and *Dancer from the Dance* illustrate the intangibility of queer space that nowadays tends to be omitted when looking back at the 1960s and 1970s in the U.S., and already foreshadow some of the paths that the more radical deconstructions and questionings of (queer) spaces would take in the 1990s.

NOTES

While the literary works I discuss in this article feature gay protagonists, I will not simply use the term ‘queer space’ to refer to spaces frequented by LGBTQ* persons; rather, my use of ‘queer space’ is meant to emphasize these spaces’ ability to push against or break through heteronormative constructions of space.

- 2 Since *Faggots* is a satire, the novel contains a number of such exaggerations and also various melodramatic elements.
- 3 This ties in with Aaron Betsky's assertion that while queer spaces are not exclusively produced or inhabited by gay men, throughout the twentieth century, "[t]he city was rewritten by men cruising," which produced "citable" queer spaces (12). It is worth mentioning that lesbian women are almost entirely excluded from the novels' constructions of gay urban life, which portray queer urban spaces not necessarily as exclusively gay, but as predominantly male and sex-positive. Gay lives outside the urban cruising scene are largely considered "as boring as straight people's lives]" (Holleran 18). Note that novels such as Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982) and Sarah Schulman's *Rat Bohemia* (1995) portray lesbian protagonists in urban environments (specifically New York). While a parallel analysis of the portrayal of queer spaces in lesbian novels would be highly interesting, the scope of the essay keeps me from developing this point.
- 4 Fred uses the term because it has "punch, bite, a no-nonsense, chin-out assertiveness, [...] which, at present, was no more self-deprecatory than, say, 'American'" (Kramer 18).
- 5 In German, the phrase reads: "ihre notorische Instabilität als Raum zwischen Privatem und Öffentlichem" (Poole 135).

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