“IF YOU HAVEN’T MADE SOMEBODY ANGRY, YOU HAVEN’T DONE SOMETHING RIGHT:” LARRY KRAMER’S OUTSIDER PERSONA

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This study offers an exploration of Larry Kramer’s outsider persona, and how that persona affected both his writings as well as public perception of the author. My argument utilizes specific texts that provide insight into various facets of Kramer’s persona, both public and private. A critical analysis of Faggots, several activist texts from the Reagan administration, and The Normal Heart provide the case studies from which I analyze Kramer’s persona(s).

This thesis analyzes these works and is informed by deconstructive terms, particularly those of Paul de Man and Jacques Derrida. In addition, Philip Auslander’s notion of persona provides the definition of a term that is continually explored in each of the three chapters.

The outcome of this text is not whether Kramer has an outsider persona, but how that persona developed and became a permanent feature of his writings and public appearance. Kramer’s persona changed drastically in just a few years, usually in response to cultural events affecting him directly or though his community. In the conclusion of this study, I do not merely restate my argument but show, through recent writings, how Kramer’s persona and the public’s response to his words still are relevant today.
For Mom and Dad

I Love You Both As Meat Loves Salt
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Introduction

Outsider: n. Competitor, applicant, etc. Thought to have little chance of success.

My study is an interdisciplinary approach to discuss novelist, activist, and playwright Larry Kramer, using the variety of his artistic works to explore his persona/s/.

At the onset of this project I had one argument that I wanted to study—that Larry Kramer is an outsider, and I began my research by investigating what is necessary to fulfill that role. The Oxford English Dictionary’s definition of outsider is vague, lacking a proper context. Larry Kramer embodies the characteristics of being on the outside, politically, rhetorically, and culturally. Rarely a quiet voice in the gay community, Kramer has chastised, badgered, and railed against the men who comprised his queer family. Because of his novel Faggots, his activist tracts, and his play The Normal Heart the gay community ostracized him at various points in his career. Nevertheless, he eventually embraced the outsider status thrust upon him, and used that persona to engage in important cultural work. The questions at the center of my research are how did Larry Kramer become an outsider and what role did that persona have upon his writings, personally and critically?

The literature review that follows provides a cultural and/or historical context that informs the world of the novel Faggots, Kramer’s activist writings, and the play The Normal Heart. The review also provides the reader insight into the amalgamation of methods used and some ultimately discarded, to address my central question: what informed Larry Kramer’s outsider persona and how is that persona present in his writings? This section is divided into three parts: 1) works relating to methodology 2) works relating to 1970s and 1980s gay male culture and 3) works relating to queer fiction and dramatic literature.

Literature Review
I found myself at a crossroads when faced with the decision over which theoretical lens to apply to my study. I initially pursued the idea of a New Historicist reading of Kramer’s works, but ultimately I chose a different critical lens, deconstruction, to provide the backbone for this work, but I found myself concerned with the project’s lack of queer theory. As I began researching these different methodologies, I came to the realization that while queer theory is the “obvious” choice it does not necessarily enable insight into the development of Kramer’s persona. For this research I chose to analyze Kramer’s works and apply certain deconstructive ideas to that analysis.

One of the first texts I encountered in my search for a methodology was Straight with a Twist: Queer Theory and the Subject of Heterosexuality, a series of essays that explore how straight scholars approach queer subject matter and the question of justification and position. This study has helped me to understand my own positionality in relation to my subject. I am not only a heterosexual female discussing a uniquely gay male experience, but I was born after the initial appearance of AIDS and view that pre-AIDS lifestyle with no personal context.

I also looked for comprehensive reference texts and found that in A Genealogy of Queer Theory, a text that offers a look at the effect that queer theory has had upon the academy, as well as what constitutes queer theory or even queer. I found the book to be a good source for exploring how the ideas of Foucault, Butler, and Sedgwick have reached into diverse academic domains such as history, psychology, and literary theory. I hesitated to not include this book in my study but I realized that while this text offers a theoretical exploration of the queer world, it did not contribute information relevant to gay culture’s immediate impact upon gay men and their perception of events.

In Queer Theory and the Jewish Question editors Daniel Boyarin, Daniel Itzkovitz, and Ann Pellegrini present essays that offer insight into the relationship
between queer oppression and anti-Semitism. This work is extremely useful for a study of Larry Kramer as his identity is both gay and Jewish, as has often struggled with the similarities of both identities (Boyarin 1). While I have chosen to focus my argument on Kramer’s sexuality, understanding his religion’s effect on his persona is an equally important and rarely often explored aspect of Kramer.

For a more specific look at queer authors and their works I considered The Queer Renaissance: Contemporary American Literature and the Reinvention of Lesbian and Gay Identity, a collection of essays that explore the formation of identity within the gay community in the Post-Stonewall era. While English professor Robert McRuer does not address Faggots or The Normal Heart directly, his discussion of identity formation in the queer novel is interesting. He argues that a fault of many gay novels is that the author positions the queer protagonist as “other” rather than a unique individual within the larger society. He uses Edmund White’s A Boy’s Own Story (1982) and compares the book with a work of lesbian fiction published at the same time. However, the differences between the texts are numerous: one is the struggle of a young white gay man to “come out,” while the other is the experience of an African-American lesbian. While McRuer’s analysis has merit, the two compared texts regarding identity formation are problematic, considering these cultural differences between the two communities (29-30). As my study explores how Kramer’s beliefs positioned him as an outsider within the gay community, McRuer’s seemingly monolithic approach to queer identity is ultimately not useful for this project.

While these works have provided various ways of exploring the gay community and gay culture through a lens of queer theory, the following books are texts that address the same issues from a historical perspective. My discussion of queer culture in this literature review is limited and focuses on the culture of the 1970s as that time
period’s hedonism influenced Larry Kramer’s writings. Moreover, this discussion of queer culture is limited to urban, white gay men and the sexual revolution and liberation that followed the Stonewall Riots. I include these texts because they provide the broader context for Larry Kramer's work, analyzing the mainstream political and social beliefs that Kramer challenged.

The first text I explored was *Out of the Closets: Voices of Gay Liberation*, a collection of essays that represent the radical voice of the gay liberation movement. They not only rejected the heteronormative society that marginalized them, but also tried to trouble the issues of class, race, gender, and religion that are problematic within the gay community. The editors’ (self-identified) Marxist voices were concerned with political revolution and the emerging gay and lesbian voices. The text shows that sexual freedom and hedonism occurred alongside the aggressive political movement tied in with Black Power, Neo-Marxism, and Anti-War movements. While Kramer never aligned himself with the voices contained in *Out of the Closets*, the essays do show the fractured nature of the gay community he navigated (Jay 1).

A text with a similar subject but a noticeably different approach is *The Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement*, an apparent textbook that was published in 1992, twenty years after *Out of the Closets*. The author, gay and lesbian activist Margaret Cruikshank, offered a historical look back at gay liberation and provides simplistic divisions in the gay community rather than the bitter fractures. She discusses the movement from different perspectives in each chapter, including issues of race and class and their effect upon the gay and lesbian experience. Her work is a reference text that appeals to a broad audience, not discussing some of the more risqué aspects of queer culture (Cruikshank 1-2).
Public Sex/Gay Space is a collection of essays that explore why public sex is so important to the gay man’s experience. The discussion centers on bathhouse and disco cultures that dominated urban gay communities. For my purposes the most useful essay is “Beauty and the Beach: Representing Fire Island,” the location of Faggots’ climax and described as a specific location that has become culturally defined as gay men’s sexual space. This text provides an in-depth look at the importance of erotic spaces for gay men, locations that Kramer simultaneously frequented and criticized.

A book that explores issues similar to those in Public Sex/Gay Space is Sex Between Men: An Intimate History of the Sex Lives of Gay Men Postwar to Present. Through interviews and personal experience, the author, Douglas Sadownick, explores how sexual culture and sex spaces evolved through the years. He focuses on the hedonism of the 1970s and 1980s, and the affect of AIDS on both sex spaces and sexual attitudes. Sadownick includes Larry Kramer’s criticisms of this lifestyle, and unlike many others critics, Sadownick does not dismiss Kramer’s criticisms outright (Sadownick 138-9).

I concluded my initial review of queer cultural literature with Beyond Shame: Reclaiming the Abandoned History of Radical Gay Sex. The book labels the history of gay men into three sections “Before,” “After,” and “Lost.” “Before” is history of gay male sexuality, the public spaces and locations that defined that period of gay life. “After” documents the gay community ravaged by AIDS, and how they struggled with remaining sexually free during a plague. “Lost” is about hope in a period Post-AIDS. Here the author discusses how things can never be as they once were but the gay community can move on and create new identities that incorporate the fantasy of “Before” and the reality of “After.” It is the world of “Before” that encompasses Faggots and Kramer’s earliest activist articles.
As this thesis is an interdisciplinary study discussing Kramer’s novel and dramatic work I have included a section of this literature review that discusses queer culture and the gay community as articulated in literature and theatre. I have divided this final section into two segments, queer fiction and queer theatre. I will begin my review with some texts relating to queer novels that are relevant to my study of *Faggots* and then continue with works that address *The Normal Heart*.

An initially intriguing analysis of gay literature was *Gaiety Transfigured: Gay Self-Representation in American Literature*, a study of gay characters and the gay experience in contemporary American literature. The work considers historical context and politics but the main goal is to study a queer literature. Larry Kramer is included in a discussion of the role of AIDS in gay literature, *Faggots* is only briefly mentioned as a work that introduced gay novels into the mainstream (Bergman 10, 124).

An author who includes Kramer in his discussion of gay literature is Gregory Woods in *A History of Gay Literature: The Male Tradition*. Woods attempts to explore every aspect of the gay male experience in the written record. His tome (464 pages) disallows any in-depth study, so the usefulness of his work is as a historical record rather than a source of any detailed literary criticism.

A work that I found highly useful to my study was *Unlimited Embrace: A Canon of Gay Fiction, 1945-1995*, which provides a discussion of *Faggots* as an example of “ghetto” fiction. The author discusses *Faggots* within the novel’s cultural context, the hedonism of 1978 and contrasts *Faggots* with Andrew Holleran’s *Dancer from the Dance*. Woodhouse’s study is one of the few texts to offer in-depth criticism of *Faggots*, and his arguments support my own discussion of Kramer’s text (Woodhouse 101).
When looking at gay theatre I had a variety of sources to choose from, but I concluded my initial research by choosing three major sources focusing on characters and the experiences of gay men in dramatic literature. First, I turned to John Clum’s *Still Acting Gay*, a source book of gay male theatre in America and Britain in the twentieth century. As a survey historian and dramatic critic, Clum is critical of Larry Kramer and his theatrical works, yet *Still Acting Gay* is a useful text to my discussion of how Kramer’s persona influenced critical readings of his works (Clum 63).

A similar text is queer historian Alan Sinfeld’s *Out on Stage: Lesbian and Gay Theatre in the Twentieth Century*. His work suffers from many of the faults that are within Clum’s text, in that it is too broad a topic for extended analysis. He also is critical of Kramer but his text provides an interesting discussion of the themes and positions within the play, while Clum centers his discussion on the characters’ actions and textual analysis.

The final text I have drawn from in this area of study is Nicholas de Jongh’s *Not in Front of the Audience: Homosexuality on Stage*. This text serves a similar purpose to the works of Clum and Sinfeld, but with different results and historical voice. *Not in Front of the Audience* was published in 1992, and de Jongh views *The Normal Heart* as a relevant political play, as opposed to a history. The work offers a much deeper analysis than the two previous examples, and lacks the apparent bias present in Clum and Sinfeld’s texts (De Jongh 180).

**Limitations**

After exploring the texts included in this literature review and considering the numerous means to explore Larry Kramer’s outsider persona I established limitations for my argument. This study explores theatrical concepts such as persona. Nonetheless, to view Larry Kramer as simply a theatre figure is shortsighted. Kramer is
also a screenwriter, novelist, activist/pamphleteer, playwright and the establishment of Kramer’s outsider status and public persona concerns the three fields in which he is most widely regarded. Therefore this project focuses on Kramer’s novel *Faggots*; his activist writings from the Reagan presidency, and his play *The Normal Heart*.

There are also limitations in regards to who Larry Kramer is: white, urban, and Jewish. Kramer does not ever specifically address race in his works. Therefore I am not focusing specifically on how the various races who comprise the gay community perceived Larry Kramer. However, Kramer’s works are heavily influenced by the gay culture of urban centers, particularly New York and San Francisco, and therefore all my discussions of audience perception and gay lifestyle are limited to large cities in the United States. Finally, Larry Kramer’s Jewishness is an understood and oft-explored topic in regards to his personality and the characters in his fictional works. Whether the ostracism of Larry Kramer’ and his subsequent role as outsider was influenced by anti-Semitism is an important question to ask, but not within the scope of my argument.

**Methodology**

This study is an exploration of how Kramer negotiated among three different elements of persona and how those affected his outsider role, his rhetoric, and the perceptions of his writings. I critically analyzed selected works for how Kramer’s audience received his works, as well as how he used his persona to communicate his ideas. I focused in particular on methods articulated by Paul de Man and Jacques Derrida for this study. Kramer’s persona is entrenched in notions of public perception and I am intrigued by this question: how did Kramer negotiate within his outsider role and how were his persona/s/ reflected in his writings?

One of the major aspects of my argument is the concept of persona, and the definition of the term within the scope of my discussion. I am utilizing the concept of
persona that Philip Auslander articulated in his “Performance Analysis and Popular Music: A Manifesto.” He refers to the three layers of performance described by music critic and sociologist Simon Frith, and they apply to my argument as well: “the real person (performer as human being), the performance persona, and the character” (Auslander 6). As I discuss Larry Kramer, the focus is not only on the performance persona, but also on the “character” that appeared in both Faggots and The Normal Heart, which both had thinly-veiled versions of Larry Kramer in the protagonist roles. Like Auslander I contend that: “The real person is the dimension of performance to which the audience has the least direct access, since the audience generally infers what the performer is like as a real person from his performance persona and the characters he portrays” (7). The notion that the real person is “absent” is at the heart of Larry Kramer’s outsider persona, and the critical response to many of his works. Through embracing the public’s perception of him, Kramer was able to use a status that he initially despised to his full advantage.

Another aspect of this study that notes mentioning is the incorporation of research from both academic and popular writers. I included citations from academic and popular presses as well as some carefully chosen Internet sources. The use of these texts highlights not only the interdisciplinary quality of my study but also reflects where Larry Kramer’s writings have had the greatest impact. The crux of my argument concerns the development of Kramer’s outsider persona therefore I have included writers who have commented on Kramer and his persona/s/, regardless of the press that published them.

I have divided my argument into three chapters, all centered on different Larry Kramer writings. Chapter One and Three are bookend chapters, each providing an analysis of Kramer’s fictionalized works, Faggots and The Normal Heart and how the
texts influenced and were influenced by his outsider rhetoric. The two chapters answer these questions by providing both historical contexts as well as analyzing how audiences perceived his message through his use of personal situations and an autobiographical protagonist.

Chapter Two functions as a touchstone for my argument. It covers a larger span of time and further illuminates Kramer’s public persona that continues to define him. The chapter does this by reading selected activist writings, all published during the Reagan administration, illuminates them within historical context as well as how Kramer negotiated his persona through each piece’s rhetorical strategy.
CHAPTER ONE: LOOKING INTO THIS “FAGGOT” WORLD

In 1978, nine years after the Stonewall Riots, gay men’s fiction entered the mainstream with the publication of three groundbreaking novels: Edmund White’s *A Boy’s Own Story*, Andrew Holleran’s *Dancer from the Dance*, and Larry Kramer’s *Faggots*. While the first two works went on to become classics, heralded by the gay press and critics for their style and insight, *Faggots* caused a furor in the gay community. Kramer satirized the sex-obsessed decadence of bathhouse culture, and criticized the hedonism and debauchery of New York’s gay ghetto, seeming to ask, “Is this all there is?” *Faggots* is a notable work because it marked Kramer’s debut as a novelist and also was the first, but not last, time that he blurred the line between fiction and autobiography. In *Faggots* we follow many characters but the reader is always led back to the journey of Fred Lemish, a neurotic Jewish screenwriter, àla Larry Kramer. By placing himself and many of his acquaintances into his novel Kramer’s criticisms of the gay community were perceived by many as personal attacks, rather than impersonal satire. In order to explore the disconnect the novel caused between Kramer and the majority of the gay community I will apply Paul De Mans’ concept of irony and authorial intent to explore Kramer’s stylistic intentions and the subsequent critical reaction to the book.

The crossover success of *Faggots* in the heterosexual community led many gay publications and activists to brand Kramer a traitor, and an outsider. The publication of *Faggots* was the first instance where Larry Kramer was marginalized within the gay community, though it would certainly not be the last. Larry Kramer’s persona/s/ and his experience negotiating within them began with *Faggots*. He entered outsider status by
allowing the audience to see the true person within the protagonist of the novel, in a manner that is the reverse of Auslander’s concept of persona: “The real person is the dimension of performance to which the audience has the least direct access, since the audience generally infers what the performer is like as a real person from his performance persona and the characters he portrays” (Auslander 7).

Kramer did not write *Faggots* as an exposé or a harsh criticism; he had no idea he would encounter such a harsh reaction from readers and reviewers. Patrick Merla, a friend of Kramer’s and former editor of *The New York Native*, contributed a biography of Kramer to Lawrence D. Mass’s *We Must Love One Another or Die*. The following observations appear within that piece. Merla writes that Kramer was seeking to exorcise demons with the novel. He wanted to write about the gay life he was experiencing, the sex, the drugs, and the men. During the writing of the book, Kramer experienced a new relationship that ended when his partner not only refused to be monogamous but also tried to entice Kramer into joining the S/M community. With the help of his therapist, a constant presence in Kramer’s life, he wrote his frustrations with the gay community, the lives they led, and the culturally sanctioned quest for sex instead of love. *Faggots* took three years to write. He hoped that his friends and peers would find the events humorous but enlightening (Mass 35).

Critical reaction to *Faggots* was swift. There were a handful good reviews. However, finding those among the vicious words of both the “mainstream” press, (i.e. heterosexual), and the gay publications is difficult. The *Washington Post* declared the novel “Revolting.” The reviewer in *Publisher’s Weekly* noted that *Faggots*, “Reads like the quintessential homosexual ‘how-to’ manual; you cannot begin to imagine any sexual
variation or game that’s been left out…quite depressing.” The Los Angeles Times proclaimed that, “In an age where gays are looking more and more for acceptance and understanding, Larry Kramer will bring them only loathing and contempt” (35). The homosexual press was even more critical. Gay newspapers called for their readers to pull the book from the shelves, and then burn the copies, lest anyone read Kramer’s prose. Moreover, the target audience for the book turned their backs as well. As one person noted on a bathroom wall, “If brevity is the soul of wit, Faggots is witless” (126).

Why this spiteful response to a novel that attempts to be a satire? What nerve had Kramer inadvertently touched? In order to understand the furor that Faggots caused reader’s should know the urban gay culture of the late 1970s, in particular the sexual culture that dominated gay life. Faggots focuses the action around the bathhouses and discos of New York. As such, I will limit this discussion to those same locations as they functioned in Kramer’s life and his writing. I am citing this cultural history from two sources: Allan Bérubé, an independent scholar of gay history and recipient of the MacArthur “genius grant,” and Michael Bronski, an essayist and cultural commentator who publishes in both the academic and public press.

Cultural Context

Allan Bérubé’s 1985 essay “The History of Gay Bathhouses,” originally appeared as a submission to the California courts as a way of documenting why the bathhouses needed to remain open. He argued that bathhouses were not just locations to have sexual encounters but that these spaces strongly contributed to the development of liberated gay men (Colter 185). Bérubé writes:
For the gay community, gay bathhouses represent a major success in a century-long struggle to overcome isolation and develop a sense of community and pride in their sexuality, to gain their right to sexual privacy, to win their right to associate with each other in public, and to create “safety zones” where gay men could be sexual and affectionate with each other with a minimal threat of violence, blackmail, loss of employment, arrest, imprisonment, and humiliation. (188)

This particular statement sheds light on the gay community’s response to *Faggots* and the subsequent shunning of Larry Kramer. The gay ghetto, especially the bars and baths, were “safe” places, free of outsiders. Kramer violated those spaces, exposing them to the world, thereby threatening the safety of these locations. Similarly, for Michael Bronski, the gay ghetto was a place where a minority culture thrived and sexuality and pleasure was always present. As he explains:

> The ghetto also functions as a place of display; that is, it offers visible evidence of a minority presence and culture. For mainstream culture, this display may be a spectacle of ‘otherness,’ in which the ghetto and its inhabitants are viewed as a freak show, or more patronizingly, as needing help. But the display of ghetto culture also functions as a beacon to minority people who live outside it... By functioning as a visible focal point for minority people, ghettos produce and sustain that minority identity and culture. (189)

Kramer unintentionally humiliated the gay men who participated in the sexual freedom of the baths, by claiming that there was no pride or self-worth found in promiscuous sex.
The concept of what is read versus what the author was saying may be further explained by applying Paul de Man’s idea of irony as it applies to authorial intent. DeMan argues: “There’s irony when language starts to say things you didn’t think it was saying, when words acquire meanings way beyond the one you think you are controlling and start saying things that go against your own quest for meaning or admitted intention” (qtd. in Spikes 21). Kramer intended to satirize the sexual obsession that consumed New York’s gay bathhouses. However, many saw his book, particularly after its commercial success in the “straight world,” as exposing and endangering the few spaces where gay men could feel safe from violence and ridicule.

At the center of the gay ghetto, providing a uniquely safe space for gay men, were the gay bathhouses. By the late 1970s bathhouses had existed for almost a century in New York. However, the post-Stonewall sexual liberation and new technology caused an explosion of bathhouse culture in the 1970s. In the year 1970, The Club Baths, a national chain, opened a facility in Manhattan. The Continental Baths opened that same year and provided a dance floor, a cabaret, a pool, and facilities able to accommodate up to one thousand men. These bathhouses did not hide from the rest of society. For the first time it seems, then, the bathhouses allowed gay men to explore their sexuality in a completely homosexual environment without the fear of police intervention (Colter 200).

The backlash Larry Kramer faced with the publication of Faggots was also due to unfortunate timing. While bathhouses and discos flourished, and gay aesthetics were influencing mainstream popular culture during the 1970s, a backlash was forming. In 1977 the “Save our Children” campaign began, with popular singer Anita Bryant at the
forefront. Though centered in Florida, the aftershocks of this crusade had ramifications throughout the country. The campaign sought to repeal a gay right’s ordinance in Florida’s Dade County that provided gays and lesbians basic civil rights. The following year a similar legislative battle began in California to pass legislation that would have banned gays and lesbians from finding employment as public school teachers (Bronski 75). This crusade attacked gay men in particular for their sexual practices and “hidden” culture. When Faggots appeared at the crest of this anti-gay wave, Larry Kramer and his critical view of promiscuity was seen anti-sex, and a betrayal of the sexual practices of gay men and offering ammunition for the opposition. In 1978, then, to argue against sexual freedom was to argue against gay liberation. Promiscuity and decadence was the way to be gay in 1978. Many critics took the stance that might be summarized thusly: “if you (read: Larry Kramer) are not with us, you are against us” (Mass 131).

But times are different now— people have changed, the community has grown, and critics must have rethought their condemnation of Faggots, right? Sadly, they have not. While criticism has become scholarly in tone, and cultural context is taken into consideration, Larry Kramer and Faggots remain lightning rods for attack and harsh readings even years later. In this section of this chapter, I look at a recent critical response to Faggots, noting specifically how today’s gay men analyze the characters and events of the novel.

Critical Response

Reed Woodhouse, a professor at MIT and associate editor of The Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review, sets forth an impressive thesis in his 1998 text, Unlimited Embrace. In short, Woodhouse argues that books are not necessarily good, bad, or an
indictment of authors. His text is a discourse about books that he feels speaks to gay men, and he considers *Faggots* an important book, regardless of the initial public response (Woodhouse 13).

Woodhouse begins his discussion of *Faggots* discussing his own coming-of-age in a gay ghetto and his immersion in the sexual freedom that particular environment provided. He admits his own reticence to the hedonism of the late 1970s, but claims that these thoughts were soon dismissed because of the message put forth by the gay newspapers: i.e., promiscuity was an act of resistance. In 1978, two novels appeared that addressed his own confusion about the decadent scene in which he was involved, one stimulating and one frustrating, Andrew Holleran’s *Dancer from the Dance* and *Faggots*. *Dancer from the Dance* is an almost Gatsby-like reflection on the search for love amidst a sea of sex and drugs. Woodhouse places this book on a personal pedestal, claiming that he found himself in that novel. With *Faggots*, however, he is far from reverent (102-3).

Woodhouse begins his discussion on *Faggots* by recalling a conversation between himself and a friend named Kevin. Woodhouse recalls criticizing the book, its lack of style, the improbability, and the jokes that fall flat. In turn, Kevin stopped him with this erudite and true comment: “I like *Faggots* because I’m a neurotic Jew; you like *Dancer* because you’re a neurotic Catholic” (103). This statement stunned Woodhouse, and he realized that he had overlooked the strengths of Kramer’s writing because they are so distinct to Kramer and his culture. Larry Kramer’s identity as a gay man is as visible and important to his private and public persona, as is his presence as an anxiety-ridden, secular Jew. Kevin got the jokes, because they are part of a shared common
language. Woodhouse thus argues that *Faggots* is a novel informed as much by Kramer’s Jewishness as his sexual identity and lifestyle.

Woodhouse further articulates his problem with *Faggots* when he states that the novel “is not so much a good or bad book as an ingenious trap.” He claims, as have many others, that the book begins with an insult—“There are 2,556,596 faggots in the New York City area”—and posits that this phrase, with its derogatory term, is the first joke of the text. If you are insulted or do not “get it” you need a better sense of humor, or you are too sensitive about that term and therefore uncomfortable with gay liberation. Woodhouse also tired of the practical joke mentality that permeates the novel, the humor gained by focusing on the faults and defects of “perfect faggot” characters. Woodhouse notes that this is the “ingenious trap” of *Faggots*, the joker is always right but Kramer hurts himself because whenever he seems to be making a genuine point, he undermines the seriousness with an immature jest at someone else’s expense (108-9). It is the reliance on jokes that causes Kramer to fall into the trap described by de Man: “Authors never say what they mean without also saying something other than what they mean, which falsifies what they mean to say” (qtd in Spikes 35). Kramer’s satire is successful because he does highlight certain issues that plagued gay men: drug use, family dysfunction, and fears of commitment. However, his glossing over these issues in favor of a witty *bon mot* negates any message the book strives to impart.

Another aspect that puzzles Woodhouse is that in a book satirizing the highly sexual lifestyle of New York City’s gay men, there is no fun to be found in *Faggots’* sexual encounters. Woodhouse pronounces that the men of Kramer’s world come across as “naughty boys with moral tics,” but never lustful, complicated men. He
references the scene when we first meet Irving Slough, an older gentleman, who is piercing the nipple of his companion Hans. The piercing is not a major moment, and that is the problem. In 1978, body piercing was not a common phenomenon and usually men with body piercings participated in bondage and sadomasochism. In *Faggots*, sadomasochistic pleasure is a silly kink; there is neither justification for those who practice S/M nor any understanding of the power dynamics. Irving and Hans seemingly yawn through the procedure and their interaction lacks eroticism. The two men never become three-dimensional characters but instead remain two decadent white men spending a boring afternoon engaged in kinky sexual play (Woodhouse 113).

That is just one example of a sexual encounter in *Faggots* that led to Woodhouse’s distaste for the novel. When Boo Boo Bronstein, *Faggots*’ poor little rich boy, recalls having sex for the first time, it is not pleasure he remembers but guilt, “the guilt, ah yes, The Guilt!” While this again references (albeit indirectly) the Semitic humor of *Faggots*, this pronouncement rings false for Woodhouse. The 1970s was the first time gay men were able to experience sex without guilt; yet, Kramer assumes that every gay man is plagued with his neuroses. Kramer sees guilt as a driving force behind sexual promiscuity, and it is that assumption rather than an exploration of the character’s guilt that leaves them as self-hating stereotypes (113-14).

Finally, Woodhouse wonders, if we look at the characters and the gay life presented in *Faggots*, why would anyone be gay? Why not simply live amongst the heterosexuals or at the very least abandon the ghetto? According to Kramer, Woodhouse argues, a faggot is someone who wastes his abilities and talents by not pursuing mature relationships. A faggot, in other words, is an inadequate man who
enjoys pain as pleasure and whose sexual appetite is so naturally weak that it requires
him to pursue the outside stimuli of S/M and anonymous encounters. Woodhouse
believes that Kramer is not actually satirizing the gay ghetto but arguing that gay life is
just a shadow of the straight world. As long as gay men refuse commitment and
continue the celebration of casual sex, they will continue to be unhappy and unfaithful
(116-17). Woodhouse’s reading is particularly insightful because it recognizes the fault
in trying to write a popular novel that seeks to exorcise personal demons. Not all gay
men were unhappy in the 1970s—at least not because of their sexuality—but Kramer
evidently was.

Larry Kramer’s most personal issues, and the difficult relationship with his former
lover, are articulated in the experiences of Fred Lemish. I have argued that Larry
Kramer’s alter ego is Fred Lemish; he is our protagonist and guide to the world we
cruise. His voice is the most complex and engaging but also frustrating. Kramer’s
description of Lemish reads:

Your average, standard, New York faggot obsessive kvetch. Nice though,
single, still, though for many years he had claimed to want a lover…Fred
had, at thirty-nine, hoped love would come by forty. He had only four days
to go. (Kramer, Faggots 13-15)

Fred spends the novel chasing one man, the unattainable Dinky Adams. They had
been lovers and now Fred wants a commitment, a task he pursues while Dinky tricks at
the baths, his home, and frequents the Meat Rack at Fire Island. At the heart of the
satire there is a real desperation following Fred, leading the reader to hope that he and
Dinky will walk off into the sunset together. However, this cannot be. Their courtship is
full of unrequited sexual tension; Dinky returns to Fred but cannot maintain an erection with him. Meetings that might have come straight out of a Feydeau farce ensue: Fred is at the baths, Dinky enters. Will the two meet, and will they be alone? The relationship of Fred and Dinky culminates on Fire Island, as does Fred's realization about his world.

The scene begins when Fred and Dinky meet in Dinky’s apartment. Once there, Fred pleads for Dinky to commit and settle down. However, Dinky decides that he does not want the heteronormative life that Fred is offering and wants to be friends but not lovers. Fred delivers his speech about love and the difficulty of finding such a thing in the gay ghetto, yet his hypocrisy, his own preoccupation with sexual gratification, is exposed. While rejecting all that Dinky stands for, he cannot help but watch and become aroused as Dinky dresses for the evening’s entertainment—cock rings, leather vest, pants, and finally leather boots. Lemish delivers his speech while watching Dinky:

I’m tired of being a New York City-Fire Island faggot. I’m tired of using my body as a faceless thing to lure another faceless thing, I want to love a Person!, I want to go out and live in that world with that Person, a Person who loves me, we shouldn’t have to be faithful, we should want to be faithful, love grows, sex gets better, if you don’t drain all your fucking energy off somewhere else, no, I don’t want you to neutralize us into a friendship!, for all of the above!...stop running away from me and yourself and answer me…and…where did you say you bought the boots? (qtd. in Mass 130)

Fred has one last moment with Dinky, with Dinky fondling Fred and offering his body when Fred stops the moment and proclaims: “You are Unwanted. I reject you through
and through” (Kramer, *Faggots* 299). He then leaves his Dinky with these thoughts, “Now it’s time to just be. Just like I have brown eyes. I’m here. I’m not gay. I’m not a fairy. I’m not a fruit. I’m not a queer. A little crazy maybe. And I’m not a Faggot. I’m a Homosexual Man. I’m Me. Pretty Classy” (302). *Faggots* ends with Fred Lemish turning forty. Alone, but self-fulfilled, he has turned his back on it all. Moreover, Fred prophesies the reaction his alter ego will face, and he provides this advice: “OK, Lemish. Your journey now begins. Your work is now cut out for you. Your hard work. From this moment not one other opinion matters but for your own. There will always be enemies. Time to stop being your own” (300). This is advice that Kramer would apply through his experiences after *Faggots*, although some would argue that Kramer’s greatest enemy has always been Kramer.

Larry Kramer wrote Fred Lemish as the outsider in the world of *Faggots*. Lemish also exists as one of the “character” aspects of Kramer’s persona, in the trio of layers that comprise Auslander’s aforementioned idea of persona. However, Kramer could not have predicted the extent of the backlash his novel would create. With the publication of *Faggots*, Larry Kramer became a public outsider in the gay community. I argue that *Faggots* placed them, Lemish and Kramer, as outsiders in two ways: as a critic and as a hypocrite, while Kramer alone was considered by some queer cultural critics as a “prophet.”

Lemish spends the entire novel criticizing the world he lives in, yet participating in the lifestyle he condemns. The same problem could be said of Larry Kramer. Lemish spends the novel chasing Dinky Adams. His problem with Dinky, the part of him that he feels he can fix, is his promiscuity, his constant presence at the baths. Yet Fred knew
that Dinky was an active participant in the sexual spaces of the ghetto, because he had been one of Dinky’s one-night stands years before their relationship began. “Fred had been amazed as well to discover in his address book’s rear that he and Dinky had met and tricked seven years ago, a one-nighter; Fred vaguely remembered fucking him” (15). Was it the other way around; was Dinky Fred’s conquest that night? Is that why Fred is so critical of Dinky, because he recognizes his younger self, or his former undiscriminating sexual appetite in the other man? It is an unknown variable in their relationship that Fred participates in the sexual culture but does not enjoy it himself, indeed never enjoys it himself. And Kramer, who was advocating for gay culture to be less sex-obsessed, was still enjoying the vices he championed against: “I go to the baths, which I find useful. I don’t enjoy backroom bars...It is very, very hard to give up the life; and, especially, the deeper and deeper you get into it—it’s like a narcotic” (qtd in Mass 36). Perhaps Kramer wrote his alter ego as the man he wanted to be, with the strength to turn his back on the world that both disgusted and seduced him.

After Faggots’ publication, Larry Kramer was not welcome in that intoxicating world. Merla writes that Kramer was no longer invited to parties, friends refused to speak to him, and people would cross the street to avoid talking to him. Fred Lemish had the opportunity to reject a world that did not suit him any longer; notably, Kramer did not have the luxury. Larry Kramer could not have known that this rejection was one of the hardships he would face, nor he could he have known that the shunning contributed to a new persona, that of prophet (35).

Prophets have one thing in common; they predict a truth that many may not want to hear. Non-religious prophets are considered rare. Most disasters come out of left
field and it is only in the aftermath that someone will voice that famous phrase: “I knew this would happen!” Yet, Larry Kramer prophesied without knowing the consequences of his statements when they first appeared. Like all prophets, Kramer wished that he had been wrong.

Larry Kramer began writing *Faggots* in 1975, and finished it in 1978. The first rumblings of the AIDS crisis did not begin until 1980. He could not have known the chilling omen in the final line of the above quotation, delivered by Fred to Dinky as the latter dresses for the evening’s orgy. “It tells me that, if those happy couples are there, they better come out of the woodwork fast and show themselves pronto so we can have a few examples for unbelieving heathens like you that it’s possible. Before you fuck yourself to death” (Kramer, *Faggots* 265). Author and columnist Gabriel Rotello argues that the anti-promiscuity message of *Faggots* was the first element of prophecy, equating spiritual death to eventual physical death. Dinky would “fuck” himself to death, losing his soul by living completely in the body, and would most likely have fucked himself to *death* in the coming wave of illness. Kramer realized the power of his words upon the gay community, particularly after the AIDS crisis ended the lifestyle he criticized. He accepted the shunned position he now held within the gay community: “I didn’t know it then, but I was learning—not originally by choice—that necessary lesson for anyone who insists on speaking his mind; how to become a loner” (qtd in Mass 90-1). Kramer would continue to exist in an outsider space even as the furor over *Faggots* died down. This new persona would afford him a freedom when he became an activist. But, the betrayal many felt following *Faggots* would also hinder his effectiveness.
With *Faggots* Larry Kramer attempted to write a novel that emulated his literary inspirations Waugh and Swift. Instead, he wrote the book that caused a commotion within his community and continues to polarize readers. He paid a heavy price for the varied readings; the community that provided his home and offered the protection of ghetto culture shunned him. But in the years to come, the years that saw his prophecy realized, Larry Kramer did not stay silent. For the seven years between *Faggots* and *The Normal Heart* Kramer became an activist and a pamphleteer. It was in this new role that Kramer communicated from his public persona, embracing the attention and protection provided by his outsider status.
CHAPTER TWO: KRAMER VS. EVERYONE

I think that what has destroyed us [as gay men] has been our determination to celebrate our promiscuity. And I will never change the way I feel about that, I am sorry. It’s childish. It has turned out to be unhealthy, and I think that we are capable of much, much, more. Larry Kramer, 1992

In the 1980s much of the attention on Larry Kramer did not concern his fictional writings but instead his editorials, speeches, and other activist texts. While Faggots and The Normal Heart have an autobiographical story at their center, the editorials and speeches produced by Kramer during his activist years establish the public persona (à la Auslander) of Larry Kramer— a persona that greatly affected how audiences read his texts. To demonstrate the differences between Kramer’s goals and public interpretation of these works I apply Jacques Derrida’s concept of textual betrayal to several of Kramer’s editorials and speeches. Kramer’s outsider status became a public persona that he negotiated in his rhetorical style, from the post-Faggots (1978) period to the years immediately following the production of The Normal Heart (1985).

Kramer appeared in the aftermath of Faggots and re-entered the public scene with his activist writings, again becoming an outsider and a lightning rod of the gay community. The gay press viewed Kramer with these labels because his works differed from others appearing in the early 1980s. Larry Kramer eventually embraced the assigned labels, and incorporated them into the public persona that had its foundation in Faggots and would become permanent with the “character” at the center of The Normal Heart.
As I discussed in the first chapter, Larry Kramer found himself ostracized by his community and many of his friends following the publication of *Faggots*. He had published their secrets, the sordid events that happened behind closed doors and in the baths. But many felt that his greatest betrayal was not merely his discussion of these activities, but that he judged gay men for their participation. Kramer disappeared from the public eye from 1978-80, not writing, for a public audience at least, and keeping a relatively low profile. In 1980, Larry Kramer again became visible, initially in the gay community, drawing the public’s attention to the growing number of untimely deaths occurring among gay men.

**Historical/Cultural Context**

In order to understand the circumstances that drew Larry Kramer out of his self-imposed exile I will provide a brief history of AIDS in the United States. I am focusing on the disease and the responses during the Reagan administration—the years that Kramer did his most prolific activist writings. I offer this history to provide a context for Kramer’s writings and to draw attention to the frustrations and ignorance that affected the rhetoric and tone of his works. I have chosen to use information available from the World Wide Web, specifically Avert.org and AEGIS.com. I have chosen to cite these Internet sources because the information is current, verified, and draw from a variety of sources. Although the use of Internet sources is questionable to some, the objective statistics and well documented histories provided by these sites proved invaluable to my study.

In the United States AIDS first appeared within the gay male community, particularly within urban gay ghettos. The first deaths occurred in 1980, when sexually
active gay men contracted rare illnesses and died soon after. But it was not until 1981 that the alarm bells began to sound. *Kaposi’s sarcoma* (KS) was a skin cancer that normally appeared in elderly patients and was rarely fatal to the young. In 1981, eight gay men, all of whom were young New York residents, contracted a deadly strain of KS. Simultaneously, on both coasts, gay men were contracting *Pneumocystis carinii pneumonia* (PCP), another rare disease, and usual treatments were ineffective. Doctors at the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) were understandably worried. They theorized possible causes for these strange infections, but felt that the problem would remain contained within the gay community, so there was no cause for panic (Fredriksson).

Of course, the disease did not remain contained within the gay community. Intravenous drug users began to develop similar symptoms to the infected men in the gay community. This unknown affliction continued to devastate gay men in huge numbers, and by July of 1981 almost 500 men were ill. Yet, the disease still did not have a name. The gay press dubbed the disease GRID—Gay Related Immune Deficiency. Scientists theorized about the possible modes of transmission, and found that the common link between the infected gay men was unprotected sexual activity.

Then the disease began to spread more rapidly. Hemophiliacs started to develop symptoms, many of whom were children, and this in turn caused a panic regarding the safety of the blood supply.

When it began turning up in children and transfusion recipients that was a turning point in terms of public perception. Up until then it
was entirely a gay epidemic, and it was easy for the average person to say 'So what?' Now everyone could relate. (Fredriksson)

As the number of cases grew so did the blind panic. Communities ostracized AIDS sufferers and many religious leaders proclaimed the disease as a “punishment” (Fredriksson). In 1983 there were 2,800 reported cases of AIDS within the United States, yet very little was being done to help. After only three years, 3,064 people had contracted the disease, 1292 were dead, and the gay male community had the highest number of casualties (Fredriksson).

In 1984, AIDS had larger cultural ramifications. Citing the need to protect public health, Officials in Departments of Health closed bathhouses. An official responded to protest from gay leaders:

There are certain places where things are allowed and certain places where they are not. You can't have sex at the McDonald's. You generally cannot have sex in the pews of a church or in a synagogue. People don't feel their civil liberties are being in any way abrogated because of that. (Fredriksson)

However, the closure of public sex spaces did not slow down the spread of the disease, and by the end of the year 3,665 people were dead from AIDS and almost 8,000 were infected with HIV. While the CDC and other doctors were doing research, the federal government had yet to respond. The name AIDS appeared, an acronym for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, an act that signaled the disease no longer affected only gay men.
In 1985, President Ronald Reagan finally mentioned AIDS in a press conference. However, the number of people living with AIDS by the end of 1986 numbered 32,000. Half the numbers of those infected were dead only six years after the disease first appeared (AEGIS.com). Statistics alone cannot explain the horror, frustration, and sadness that permeated the gay community during the early years of the AIDS crisis.

While it is important to understand the history of the AIDS crisis from a statistical viewpoint, numbers alone do not provide insight to the human drama occurring. To provide further context I will look at what it was to live during the early years of the AIDS crisis from the point of view of two activist writers: Wayne Hoffman and Larry Kramer.

Wayne Hoffman, a journalist and member of Dangerous Bedfellows (a collective of gay and lesbian writers and activists) came of age of during the early years of the crisis. Hoffman recollects:

By the time I came out in the mid-1980s, less than a decade after Faggots, the world of faggotry wasn't such a fantastic place anymore. It was all too real. Not only had had the publicly circulating connotations of disco, drugs, and fucking changed (Disco Sucks, Say No to Drugs, On Me Not In Me), but barriers were placed in the way of young people who might have wanted to sample the formerly fantastic life despite the warnings. (Hoffman 337)

Hoffman highlights the changes that occurred in just a few short years. The casual promiscuity, fetish clubs, and bathhouses were gone, replaced by paranoia and fear. Hoffman relates that his first sexual experience led to his first panicked HIV test.
“Fucking was no longer the key to a fantastic life in the 1980s, but the key to a horrific death” (338). He sums up the gay man’s experience in the 1980s gay ghetto succinctly:

The sexual revolution was over. Visions of sexual freedom had built the 1970s world of Faggots; AIDS paranoia, censorship, and Reagan-era family values quickly destroyed it. The mid-1980s sexual milieu for gay men was mired in physical violence, political vitriol, and bodily decay. Utopian notions of gay liberation had faded into defensive strategies for survival…Welcome to the real world. (338)

Hoffman mourns the loss of a world he never had the opportunity to know, particularly the demise of public sex, and the spaces provided for these explorations. He argues that locations like bathhouses and backroom bars provided a safe space for gay men. These spaces were free from homophobia and provided an important fantasy—that gay men lived in a world where they could celebrate their sexuality. AIDS changed that. The closure of bathhouses not only represented the loss of sexual freedom but also killed that necessary fantasy. Gay men lived in a world that castigated and demonized them for their sexuality; this was not a new occurrence. The loss of bathhouses denied them a safe space in which to find escape the hatred of the heterosexual world (339).

Hoffman’s experience was common among younger gay men in the 1980s, many of whom felt cheated over the loss of sexual freedom. They fought against the prior generation of gay men whose commitment labeled anti-sex for trying to protect their community. Anti-sex is the label that is most often applied to Larry Kramer, without just
cause as I will demonstrate. Studying his activist writings illuminates the reasons for the label. But, through analyzing these works, why this label is unwarranted will become clear.

In 1980, Kramer saw the beginnings of AIDS on Fire Island. According to Patrick Merla, a journalist and friend, Kramer witnessed a man carrying his ill lover. He was begging people for help, and yet the lover reportedly died of “cat scratch fever” soon after. Kramer then noticed a story buried on the back page of the New York Times discussing the diagnosis of a rare cancer among forty-one gay men. He contacted friends—many of whom would help him co-found the Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GHMC)—and together they tried to raise money for research, hoping to capitalize on Kramer’s writing fame.¹ The group went to Fire Island over Labor Day weekend where almost 15,000 gay men would regularly attend parties and dances. They armed themselves with brochures about this new strange and deadly illness. Positioning themselves in front of the most popular discos they solicited donations. Despite these efforts, they collected less than $1,000 that weekend. This seemingly cavalier attitude towards others in the gay community led to Kramer’s first activist publication (Mass 36-7).

“A Personal Appeal” appeared in the August 24th 1980 edition of the New York Native, a now defunct gay newspaper. What is most interesting about the piece is Larry Kramer’s tone when he addresses his audience. The text is short, to the point, and illustrates his fears about the growing number of sick gay men. There is no badgering, no name-calling, just a sense of desperation:

¹ I will discuss Kramer’s involvement in the GMHC in further detail next chapter.
This is our disease and we must take care of each other and ourselves. In the past we have often been a divided community; I hope that we can all get together on this emergency, undivided, cohesively, and with all the numbers we in so many ways possess.

(Kramer, Reports 9)

This subtle and restrained Larry Kramer did not last long. His authorship of Faggots was both help and a hindrance to his goals, he had the fame as an author but the infamy of writing a book many despised. From the beginning he faced attack for his attempts to rally the gay community around this bigger cause. The tone and approach of almost all of Kramer’s following pamphlets would be very different from this first one. Kramer became harsher, meaner, and incurred hatred in order to prompt his readers into paying attention to the disease taking hold in the community. Even with this changing rhetoric, the majority of Kramer’s activist writings were inspired from the same fear and desperation found within “A Personal Appeal.” Kramer realized that Faggots would not allow him to be the gay community’s friend. Kramer was an outsider but he was still being published and garnered response, he was still negotiating the backlash from Faggots and his temporary re-acceptance into the gay community via the Gay Men’s Health Crisis. One useful way of understanding Kramer’s writing and his outsider status is to consider the notion of betrayal articulated by Jacques Derrida:

A text can be read as saying something quite different from what it appears to be saying…it may be read as carrying a plurality of significance or as saying many different things which are fundamentally at variance with, contradictory to and subversive of
what may be seen by criticism as a single ‘stable’ meaning. Thus a
text may ‘betray’ itself (qtd. in Barry 72).

In analyzing Kramer’s activist writings via Derrida’s notion of betrayal, I draw
attention to the differences between authorial intent and reader response, which
are vital to the understanding of Kramer’s persona. Kramer’s authorship of
Faggots, and the lasting reputation he gained from the novel, “betrayed” his early
writings. As his activism continued his persona changed. His rhetorical
strategies affected his efficacy in achieving his larger goals— to unite the
community against AIDS—as well as influencing the ways his audience related to
him.

One example of how Kramer’s rhetoric affected the audience’s ability to
relate to and accept Larry Kramer was the speech he delivered at the 1987
Boston Gay Pride Celebration. By this time Kramer was recognized as a major
independent voice in AIDS activism. His message was the same: gay men
should focus on AIDS above all other causes. He was on the periphery of the
gay community, having been ousted by the GMHC. His voice communicated an
important message but he was temperamental. The speech he delivered at
Boston’s Gay Pride Celebration became another fiery polemic published in many
gay newspapers. His rhetoric had changed drastically. He no longer pleaded
with gay men to change and avoid imminent death. Instead he embraced the fire
and brimstone “we are all doomed unless you change” attitude that marks his
later work. In short, he lacked pity for the men who stood by and did nothing. In
his words:
I’m also tired of people coming up to me on the street and saying, ‘Thank you for what you’re doing and saying.’ They mean it as a compliment, I know. But now I scream back, “Why aren’t you doing it and saying it too?” Why are there so few people out there screaming and yelling? You’re dying too! (Reports 162-3)

The speech also used the tactic of attacking the enemy—pointing out the government’s homophobia concerning the lack of research money. He names a new target for scorn and ridicule; the man who would become his public nemesis, Dr. Anthony Fauci who had become the new head of the National Institute of Health in 1987. Kramer’s issue with Fauci at that time was the lack of funding and the inability of the NIH to provide any relevant research. But in one short year, Kramer’s position would change drastically. The true fire of Kramer’s speech, entitled “I Can’t Believe You Want to Die,” is one again directed to gay men, and his Holocaust comparison, which is first present in “1,112 and Counting,” becomes infinitely stronger.

I am telling you they are killing us and we are letting them! Yes I am screaming like a hysteric...You are going to die and you are going to die very, very soon unless you get up off your fucking tushies and fight back! Unless you do—you will forgive me—you deserve to die...AIDS is our holocaust. Tens of thousands of our precious men are dying...AIDS is our holocaust and Reagan is our Hitler. New York City is our Auschwitz. (172-3)
Kramer’s growing fury placed him further and further from the mainstream in queer politics and AIDS activism. He was further ostracized for his assertion that gay men deserved to die for their inaction. Kramer’s had accepted his outsider status by the time of this speech, and the rhetoric of his attack would become a trademark of Kramer’s future works.

In 1988, Kramer published his first attack on the new head of the NIH entitled “An Open Letter to Dr. Fauci.” I include this editorial for discussion because it is a reflection of Larry Kramer’s of the differences between Kramer’s public and private personas. Larry Kramer, in his role as agitator and activist, lashed out at whoever stood in his way, calling people murderers in a seemingly casual fashion:

> I’ve even heard you [Fauci] called a saint…But saints, miracle workers, good administrators, and brilliant scientists have imagination vivid enough to know how to spend $374 million in a time of dire emergency. You have no imagination. You are banal (a word used so accurately to describe Eichmann). (198)

Fauci offers his own opinion of Kramer’s attacks: “In his mind I represented the despicable Federal Government. It seemed that he was borrowing a concept from the movie *The Godfather*. It was ‘nothing personal, but strictly business’ (qtd. in Mass 304). Yet Kramer considered many of the people he attacked friends in real life, including Dr. Fauci, and Fauci understood Kramer’s position.

It is strange to imagine that Kramer and Fauci could be friends off the battlefield. Yet, this point speaks to the fact that Kramer had created a public
persona that defined his everyday life but did not dominate his private persona. In the book, *We Must Love One Another or Die*, two contributors shed light on this phenomenon. Calvin Trillin, a college friend of Kramer’s and his neighbor, describes how Kramer bonded with Trillin’s wife and daughters. Trillin recalls his wife’s apt response to all accusations that Kramer is often difficult: “Yes, but he’s our pain in the ass” (qtd. in Mass 309). Thus, Trillin acknowledges that friendship with Kramer has not always been easy. Trillin was a trustee at Yale, a school that Kramer attacked for supporting members of the Republican administration. When Kramer wrote a letter vilifying the university’s actions he sent a copy to Trillin including a passage that explained he could no longer be around straight people and that was why he had missed the prior Christmas celebration. The trustee quotes his wife’s response: “Odd sort of RSVP, page five of a drop copy of a letter to a university president three or four months after the event” (311). Soon after the event Kramer and the Trillins made peace, an action which demonstrates that while Kramer was difficult and oftentimes rude, his friends accepted these facets of his personality. Larry Kramer was the outsider in the gay community, a loudmouth despised by the federal government, yet he still lived his life with friends, lovers, and family. His personality and private life were no different from others even as his public persona changed.

Kramer’s private persona may have stayed stable throughout the years, but what led to the shift in rhetoric in the time between “A Personal Appeal” and the Boston Gay Pride Speech? I am convinced that it was due to the personal attack he received from Robert Chesley in *The New York Native*. Playwright Robert Chesley and Larry Kramer
had a troubled history before the publication of the article and its subsequent response. Former *New York Native* editor Patrick Merla points out their personal history in his biography of Kramer within *We Must Love One Another or Die*. According to Merla, Chesley published an unflattering piece about Kramer, although he had personally agreed with Kramer’s assertions in *Faggots*. Chesley and Kramer reconciled after the nasty exchange, but in a just a few short years, Chesley publicly attacked Kramer once more. His article contained this passage:

> I think the concealed meaning of Kramer’s emotionalism is the triumph of guilt: that gay men deserve to die for their promiscuity. In his novel, *Faggots*, Kramer told us that sex is dirty and that we ought not be doing what we’re doing…Let’s say that it’s easy to become frightened that Kramer’s *real* emotion is a sense of having been vindicated, though tragically: he told us so, but we didn’t listen to him; nooo—we had to learn the hard way, and now we’re dying. Read anything by Kramer closely. I think you’ll find that the subtext is always: the wages of gay sin is death. (qtd. in Kramer, *Reports* 16)

This denunciation is important because it seems unfounded while simultaneously foreshadowing future writings by Kramer. Popular author and columnist Gabriel Rotello argues in his 1997 essay, “Kramer as Prophet,” that Chesley was correct in his evaluation of Kramer’s message. Kramer was telling gay men they were causing their early deaths, therefore they needed to change their behavior. He never asserted that the results of promiscuity *should* be death but that they *would* be death. I agree with Rotello’s assessment of Chesley’s statement but I still find
the direct criticism of “A Personal Appeal” unnecessarily harsh, particularly when one compares the piece to many of Kramer’s later works. Such a public admonishment, from a peer, could only have contributed to the growing sense of alienation Kramer faced in the gay community, culminating in his eventual total embrace of outsider status. Kramer had not addressed issues of gay sex and promiscuity in connection to the deaths. Chesley was reading the satirical criticism found in *Faggots* within this serious activist text, a common practice of many of Kramer’s early critics. Rotello states that if anyone could have pointed his finger and said “I told you so,” it would have been Kramer—the prophetic statement of “fucking yourself to death” was coming true. Larry Kramer absorbed this attack by Chesley and continued his appeals, although the subtlety he employed in “A Personal Appeal” was gone (Mass 92, 95).

The most famous Kramer polemic, “1,112 and Counting,” appeared in the *New York Native* in the spring of 1983, and was one of the reasons for his break with the GMHC. The essay is a vicious, scathing attack on the gay community, the medical community, and the politicians—all of whom Kramer felt were just standing by as the numbers of dead gay men increased daily. In it, Kramer is critical of everyone. His appeals to the decency of gay men and the need to organize are gone, and the opening lines of the text destroy any concept of a ‘nice’ Larry Kramer persona:

If this article doesn’t scare the shit out of you, we’re in real trouble.

If this article doesn’t rouse you to anger, fury, rage, and action, gay men have no future on this earth. Our continued existence depends on just how angry you can get. (*Reports* 33)
Kramer’s text has numerous meanings, some contradictory. It is a rant against the world, it signified the role of activist becoming Kramer’s primary label, and it is the moment when Kramer embraced the role of outsider. This was not satire or catharsis at the prodding of a psychotherapist rather, this was Larry without self-censorship or apology.

Not exclusive in its finger pointing, “1,112 and Counting” helped to establish the “usual suspects” for Larry Kramer to continue to attack: the NIH, New York Mayor Ed Koch, and his own people, the gay community. Kramer accused the NIH of dragging its feet when it came to approving research grants to AIDS treatment centers. Aiming his vitriol at the general health industry, he accused the industry, policymakers and researchers, of using gay men for medical testing that would prevent the disease from spreading to heterosexuals. In his opinion, medical researchers had no altruistic motivations for helping sick gay men. Kramer believed these scientists were exclusively concerned with helping infected straight people. This accusation may seem like paranoia on Kramer’s part, but major government funding started to appear once the disease was affecting people outside of the gay community. Kramer’s battles with the NIH were just beginning and dominated many of his editorials and speeches throughout the 1980s (40).

In addition to those at the NIH, former New York Mayor Ed Koch became one of Larry Kramer’s most famous adversaries. Koch did not respond fast enough to the health crisis for Kramer’s taste, an inaction Kramer viewed as either intensely homophobic or as an attempt by the never married mayor to avoid rumors about his
own sexuality. In fact, however, Koch did attempt to work with the gay community, providing staff to act as liaisons with AIDS organizations. One wonders whether Kramer expected him to drop all other matters and focus exclusively on a disease that so little was known about. Kramer truly believed that Mayor Koch did not apply his considerable power to the rapid spread of the disease, and was therefore helping to kill the gay community (42-3). Kramer’s friend Calvin Trillin recounts an anecdote that after Koch left office he moved into an apartment building, the same one where Larry Kramer lived, and Koch had a court order that prevented Kramer from talking to him. One day Kramer, accompanied by his pet terrier Molly, was checking his mail when Koch stopped next to them to check his own post. Kramer pointed to Koch and told his dog; “Molly, that’s the man who murdered so many of Daddy’s friends” (qtd. in Mass 310).

Just as his public persona did not permanently alter his relationships with friends and companions, neither did he forgive those he considered enemies.

However, Kramer’s greatest enemy during the AIDS crisis was the very group that should have been his greatest ally: the gay male community. He states,

I am sick of guys who moan that giving up careless sex until this blows over is worse than death. How can they value life so little and cocks and asses so much… I am sick of guys who think that all being gay means is sex in the first place. I am sick of guys who only think with their cocks… I am sick of “men” who say, “We’ve got to keep quiet or they will do such and such.” They usually mean the straight majority, the “Moral” Majority, or similarly perceived representatives of them. Okay, you “men”—be my
Throughout his long career, Larry Kramer has faced accusations of an anti-sex doctrine. But, that position is nowhere in this piece. Instead, he urges men to take a hiatus from casual sex, to wait until there was more research about the mode of transmission. He believes that while men are dying every day the gay community should be focusing on care and support, not hedonism or promiscuity. He never stated: “No more sex.” He argued instead that there was so much more to being a member of the gay community, at that moment, than just sexual activity. Within this aspect of “1,112 and Counting,” Kramer’s Faggots stance can be seen as an added layer of meaning to his serious, but not anti-sex, message. His misunderstood satire and the vicious backlash that followed Faggots’ publication subverted the intent of “1,112 and Counting” (Mass 341).

The non-fiction writings of Larry Kramer, the polemics and the pamphlets, are essential to understand why this man is both loathed and loved. Larry Kramer unknowingly betrayed, following Derrida’s definition, his activist goals and authorial intent with his unflinching rhetoric. The insults that fell from his pen and tongue defined the changing arc of his outsider persona. Unfortunately, the gay community did not heed his warnings against promiscuous sex and drug use and his prophecies about mass graves came to fruition during the years of the Reagan administration. Even so, Kramer’s public persona developed within his activist writings. This persona would affect his next work, which presented his rhetoric in the “character” element of his persona.
Larry Kramer’s other major contribution during the 1980s was not another novel, but a play. The events of his involvement with the Gay Men’s Health Crisis would become immortalized in his docu-drama, *The Normal Heart*. With this piece Kramer created another thinly-veiled autobiographical protagonist, Ned Weeks. With this character Larry Kramer would once again present his public persona through the added layer of a character, yet this time any insight into his private persona would be intentional. The play was an attempt to exorcise demons and tell his side of a story that played out memorably in public. *The Normal Heart* would not only solidify Kramer’s place as an outsider but would also reveal all the facets of Larry Kramer for the first time.
CHAPTER THREE: THE OUTSIDER OF THE NORMAL HEART

On April 21, 1985, The Public Theatre premiered Larry Kramer’s unflinching new play *The Normal Heart*. The play is a dramatization of Kramer’s spectacular rise and fall within the AIDS organization, the Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC). *The Normal Heart* is a staged polemic, attacking the government and the gay community for their continued inaction in the face of extinction. The text is a synthesis of Larry Kramer’s novel *Faggots* and his activist writings during the early years of the AIDS crisis. The play uses an autobiographical protagonist, a strategy that Kramer had first developed with *Faggots*. Here Kramer is embodied in the character of Ned Weeks, who epitomizes the unwavering tone and rhetoric of Kramer’s speeches and editorials. The actions of Ned Weeks and Larry Kramer’s activist persona reveal a deeper reading in terms of Kramer’s continued role as outsider in the gay community. While Kramer’s rhetoric evolved throughout his activist writings, the character of Ned Weeks is a theatrical representation of his persona, a public acceptance of his permanent outsider role within the gay community. *The Normal Heart* illustrates Larry Kramer’s version of the bitter battle with the GMHC, allowing the audience to witness that he occupied an outsider’s position and embraced that role.

Larry Kramer’s first foray into the world of activist leadership was with the GMHC. His involvement and eventual expulsion from the group influenced both his writings and continued involvement in the fight against AIDS. I am including a history of Kramer’s involvement with the GMHC and its members in order to provide insight into not only the plot and characterization of *The Normal Heart*, but also the context that informed various critical readings of the play.
In 1982, after the plaintive editorial “A Personal Appeal” and the disappointing fundraising attempts on Fire Island, Kramer had a meeting in his living room with several friends to discuss their role in raising disease awareness and funds. Some of those who attended the meeting included fellow writer Edmund White, former Green Beret Paul Popham, and Dr. Lawrence Mass who was reporting on the disease in the New York Native. The men were discussing how to approach their activism when one group member, Paul Rapaport, commented: “gay men certainly have a health crisis” (Mass 38). That offhand remark ushered the GMHC into being. The group was unlike any other gay activist organization. They were not the political zealots found within gay liberation organizations or the extremists involved in media zaps. The GMHC were a group of educated, moderate professionals who could use their wealth and resources to reach across social divides within the gay community and even reach out to the heterosexual majority. Larry Kramer saw GMHC as an organization that would provide information about the connections between promiscuity and this new disease and offer information about protection that could stop the growing crisis. The GMHC would show straight society that the gay community took care of their sick but also that assistance was direly needed. In turn, the hope was that the government would see gay men as part of society and provide the resources the community needed. It was not long before Kramer began to realize that several founding members did not share his vision (38).

The original members quickly began recruiting volunteers to assist in the growing organization. They established telephone hotlines to answer questions and concerns, founded patient support services began, and published newsletters providing information about volunteer opportunities. All of these services became important tools
in the early years of the crisis. Four months after the initial GMHC meeting in Kramer’s living room, the group held another Fire Island fund-raiser that this time collected over $50,000 for AIDS services. Only a few weeks later a sold-out benefit occurred at Madison Square Garden, featuring the Ringling Brothers Barnum & Bailey Circus. A year following the circus benefit, GMHC was the world’s largest and most successful AIDS organization, and Larry Kramer was no longer involved in the group he helped found (38-9). What led to this sudden break?

Many issues led to the split between Larry Kramer and the GMHC. The issues leading to the break become the plot for The Normal Heart and the interactions between Kramer and other members (Popham in particular) provided additional conflict to both the real life happenings and the dramatic text.

The major tension within the GMHC was between Kramer and Popham, two men with vastly different styles of leadership. Popham was a closeted former army officer and the president of the organization. He did not believe that GMHC should try to tell people how to live. Rather, he thought it should provide them with the latest government warnings about AIDS. In particular, he did not believe in issuing guidelines in regards to sexual protection. The gay community had fought for years to gain sexual freedoms and threatening that aspect of gay culture was not the goal of the GMHC. Kramer was the only member of GMHC’s board of directors to disagree with Popham’s stance, and his constant questioning of Popham’s leadership abilities led to friction within the GMHC (Kramer, Reports 31-2).

The differences in rhetorical style that led to friction between GMHC members and Kramer are evident in “1,112 and Counting.” The unrelenting article has a line of
text that interrupts the flow of the piece: “I am writing this as Larry Kramer and I am speaking for myself, and my views are not to be attributed to the Gay Men’s Health Crisis” (33). This one statement foreshadows the imminent break between Kramer and GMHC. While the organization was content to provide support for those afflicted with AIDS, Kramer was taking action against those who had the power to either stop the crisis or stem the tide. The article’s accusatory tone generated media interest in the GMHC and the gay community’s response to the growing AIDS crisis. Because so many within the GMHC were unwilling to become the voice and face of gay America, that role was left to Kramer, and his radical appearances only pushed him further from the group. The most noteworthy of these appearances was on the Today Show where Kramer called Mayor Ed Koch “a pig” on national television. His blunt abrasive style caused enormous friction within GMHC (32-3, 51).

In addition to Kramer and Popham butting heads over the GMHC’s role in providing education and Kramer’s media appearances, there was tension because Larry Kramer was infatuated with Popham. Popham did not return Kramer’s feelings and the unrequited crush only made their disagreements tenser. As Kramer commented when looking back on the relationship: “My problem with him was of a different nature: I was half in love with him, which he sensed and which made him uncomfortable” (66). The difficulties between Popham and Kramer were just one element of the split. The heart of the conflict was what role GMHC would play in the AIDS crisis and how members would bring attention to the fight.

Kramer’s vision of GMHC was that of an activist group spreading information to the community and continually pushing for government action and support. The reality
was quite arguably different. The GMHC quickly became a social services organization that did not try to draw attention. Many of the members were not out and feared reprisal if anyone learned they were involved in a gay advocacy group. They also shied away from Kramer’s tactics and rhetoric for fear of being tainted with an anti-sex label. (Mass 39)

After almost two years of hounding and protests from Larry Kramer and desperate telephone calls from the GMHC, Ed Koch agreed to meet with members of the gay community to address the AIDS crisis. However, only ten people could be included. Kramer assumed that the meeting was concerning his actions and that he would attend as a GMHC representative. However, Popham and other members of the board were worried that Kramer would be hostile and aggressive with the Mayor, and thereby destroy any chances of meaningful discussion. Thus, Popham decided to attend the meeting with a new volunteer, and the board agreed that these two men and not Kramer should represent the organization. Upon hearing of this decision, Kramer confronted Popham and accused him of betrayal. He threatened to quit the board unless he could attend the meeting. Popham accepted his resignation, and Larry Kramer was no longer welcome in the organization he helped found (Kramer, Reports 65).

But Larry Kramer did not disappear from the GMHC entirely. He regretted his hasty resignation and tried to return to his former position three times. He recalls making a fool of himself in order to prove his seriousness and commitment; commandeering a disk jockey booth at a GMHC event and begging the attendees to support his reinstatement (Mass 40-1). The board continuously refused his re-entry;
Patrick Merla recalls that Popham proclaimed Kramer would return to GMHC “over his dead body” (qtd. in Mass 42). Kramer did not accept the refusals quietly. He began to publish statements such as “Equal to Murderers” vilifying the members of the GMHC. The polemics were still rhetorically powerful but Kramer had lost his legitimacy. His ouster from GMHC not only wounded his pride and his public persona, but also threatened his place in the spotlight. His role in the gay community was no longer as an unpopular activist, but once again an outsider.

After his public dismissal from the Gay Men’s Health Crisis and the embarrassment over his behavior, Kramer left New York for Europe. His most important pilgrimage was to Dachau. He was shocked to learn that the death camp had opened in 1933. He wondered why the United States did nothing while the Nazis annihilated his people. He saw history repeating itself, with his people once again facing extermination and no one helping. Kramer returned to New York and began to research the similarities between the Jews and American gays. He funneled his research, his fear, his frustration, and his anger into a new play. Just as he had created Faggots to work through the demons following a difficult relationship and bad break-up, The Normal Heart was born out of a need to write in response to his feelings. However, the goals he sought with the play’s production were markedly different from that of his satire (43-4).

The Normal Heart had a difficult transition from page to stage. Kramer could not find a New York agent to support the play. The directors he personally contacted declined to stage the show. No one—not Broadway, regional theatre, or even PBS—would produce The Normal Heart. Then, a friend of Kramer’s and a GMHC volunteer
gave the script to his employer, Joseph Papp of the Public Theatre. Papp agreed to produce the play and Kramer set forth producing more drafts and finding a director. The process began in 1983 and the play opened in 1985. During these years, Kramer continued to produce editorials and give activist speeches against the government’s inaction and the GMHC’s cowardice. Further complicating the issues between Kramer and the GMHC was his intimate relationship with the executive director of the GMHC, Rodger McFarlane. McFarlane’s support of Kramer and his play put him at odds with the rest of GMHC, especially Paul Popham. McFarlane ended the relationship with Kramer in 1984. He recalled; “I am living with this man and then going to work and reading letters, in the press as well as to my colleagues and friends, saying that I’m a murderer…I’d had two years of Larry Kramer screaming and I just couldn’t take it any longer” (45). Kramer needed help with the play and McFarlane offered support, regardless of their romance’s end, by producing up-to-date AIDS fact sheets to include in the programs. With the support of McFarlane and Papp The Normal Heart opened at the Public Theatre in the spring of 1985. Like Faggots did before, Kramer’s new work triggered an immediate response (Mass 182).

As I have indicated previously, The Normal Heart is not a subtle play. Its continued power and resonance is due to the bold, unflinching, unsubtle language and potent message. As such, The Normal Heart is, arguably, one of the most successful pieces of propaganda theatre ever produced. Unabashedly borrowing from prior agit-prop works, it set out to instruct and arouse its audience to political passion and political action, a goal it seemed to achieve (182).
The Normal Heart is the story of Ned Weeks, a writer who is a founder of an organization that is strikingly similar to Gay Men’s Health Crisis. Drawing from his own experiences, Kramer depicts Ned’s fights with the other members. There is a parallel story told within the play as well: that of the beginning, middle, and end of Ned’s relationship with his sick lover, Felix. Although the disease that Ned and his organization are fighting against, and Felix is dying from, is never named, the original production of The Normal Heart did not allow for any ambiguity. On the walls of the Public Theatre, AIDS statistics were written in chalk and crossed out and updated as the number of victims rose throughout the run of the show. In addition to the daunting numbers, the walls also followed the New York Times coverage of the AIDS crisis in comparison to other medical scares from recent years. The details were not flattering. The walls showed that during the first fourteen months of the crisis when there were almost 1000 reported cases, the Times had only published seven articles. This compared to the fifty-four articles published during the three month Tylenol scare, only seven people died during that event. The effect of Kramer’s Dachau visit was also evident on the production with the passage from an excerpt from American Jewry during the Holocaust written on one wall:

From the very onset of Jewish crises, the Committee responded to each new Nazi outrage by practicing their traditional style of discreet ‘backstairs’ diplomacy…The Jewish delegates were usually politely informed that the matter was being given the ‘most earnest attention.’ They were still trying to persuade the same officials when the war ended. (qtd. in Mass 46-7)
The Normal Heart opened to mostly positive reviews. Only the New York Times and the Village Voice printed unfavorable notices. The audiences responded very well to the play. It went on to become the longest running show in the history of the Public Theatre. On the other hand, there was the reaction of Kramer’s former colleagues, Lawrence Mass. Mass became highly upset at his first viewing of the play and had to be escorted out. He later admitted the difficulty seeing the play objectively:

The Normal Heart promulgates a number of sometimes patently self-aggrandizing, sometimes stridently polemical distortions, simplifications, and untruths. However, while broadcasting just how serious this epidemic is and how much worse it’s going to get, The Normal Heart speaks more persuasively than any other book, film, or play of recent years about such long-standing and entangled crises as gay self-hatred, the closetedness of powerful homosexuals, the dearth of visible gay leadership, and the underlying homophobia of society at large. (Mass 246)

Mass’s criticisms of the play are not unique. Some saw The Normal Heart as a revenge play where Kramer was the hero and the GMHC’s members were the villains. The harshest critic of the play was the openly gay editor of the Village Voice, Richard Goldstein. He accused Kramer of being a narcissist who wanted to shame gay men, who viewed sex with contempt, and who had always cast himself as the hero. But Ned Weeks is not a hero, Weeks is the protagonist of The Normal Heart. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a hero as “a person noted or admired for nobility, courage, and outstanding achievements” (OED 273). Weeks is selfish, difficult, and boorish.
Even the scenes of tenderness between him and his lover Felix are complicated with Ned's constant need to lecture:

(Ned comes over to Felix and sits beside him. Then he leans over and kisses him. The kiss becomes quite intense. Then Ned breaks away, jumps up, and begins to walk around nervously.)

NED: The American Jews knew exactly what was happening, but everything was downplayed and stifled. Can you imagine how effective it would have been if every Jew in America had marched on Washington? Proudly! Who says I want a lover? Huh!? I mean, why doesn't anybody believe me when I say I do not want a lover? (Kramer, Normal 52)

Even when Felix becomes ill, Ned does not change. He stays with his lover Felix, and continues to care for him, but he refuses to let Felix take the experimental AIDS drug, AZT. When Felix starts surrender to the disease, Ned does not provide comfort and soft words but instead rages at his dying lover:

You can't eat the food? Don't eat the food. Take your poison. I don't care. You can't get up off the floor—fine, stay there. I don't care. Fish—fish is good for you; we don't want any of that, do we? (Item by item, he throws the food on the floor.) No green salad. No broccoli; we don't want any of that, no, sir…You want to die Felix? Die! (Ned retreats to a far corner. After a moment Felix crawls...with extreme effort makes his across to Ned. They fall into each other's arms.) Felix, please don't leave me. (qtd. in Mass 223-4)
Scenes like this render Weeks, and therefore Kramer, pathetic. The desperation, fear, and anger of Ned Weeks are not the trademarks of a hero. The Ned-Felix storyline does not lead the spectator to find Weeks (and therefore Kramer) more heroic but rather it translates abstract news stories into a concrete story of doomed lovers.

Was Kramer intending to write a play that would cast him in a sympathetic yet heroic light? Clearly, he was not. He was making a socio-political statement that brings to mind Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Emile Zola’s *J’Accuse*. These writers were not seeking popularity and acclaim with their works. Instead, they sought to achieve a wide audience and impart their message. As Kramer puts it, “When I wrote *The Normal Heart*, I knew exactly what I wanted to achieve: to hear my words screamed out in a theatre and to hope I’d change the world” (qtd. in Mass 182-3). As for Kramer’s characterization of Ned Weeks:

> I tried to make Ned Weeks as obnoxious as I could. He isn’t my idea of a hero. He fucks up totally. He yells at his dying lover and screams and rants and raves at and against everyone and everything else and gets tossed out of ‘the organization’ on his ass. I was trying, somehow and again to atone for my own behavior. (qtd. in Mass 45)

*The Normal Heart* was a success in spite of (or perhaps due to) the criticism surrounding Kramer’s autobiographical protagonist. The play provided Larry Kramer with a means of expressing his activist ideology, and the “character” facet of his public persona contributed to Kramer’s outsider role in the gay community. The obnoxious ranting character of Ned Weeks and the blunt abrasive political beliefs of Larry Kramer became indistinguishable for many spectators and critics. Kramer was permanently on
the outside of the gay community, in terms of both sexual politics and AIDS activist tactics. He promoted personal responsibility, a community built around more than sexual expression, and public (verbal) attacks against political leaders. These stances contributed to Kramer’s outsider persona but also spectatorship and readings of The Normal Heart.

Since its premiere at the Public, critics often ignore the message and historical context of the play in favor of focusing exclusively on Kramer’s politics and persona. I argue that, like Faggots, critical discussions of The Normal Heart provide a variety of readings into both Kramer’s persona and the efficacy of his writing.

Professor John M. Clum is one of the leading historians and critics of gay male theatre within the academy. He has never disguised his dislike of Larry Kramer’s works, labeling Kramer an “old-fashioned realistic/naturalistic playwright” whose is better placed alongside other realist playwrights such as O’Neill rather than queer writers like Tony Kushner (Mass 200-1). Clum argues that Kramer’s anti-sex message and dismissal of the strides made forward by gay liberators is at the forefront of The Normal Heart. His major criticism is that Kramer does not attempt to find resolution with his play. To him, Felix dying in the final scene only sends a message of doom, that gay men will end up alone because of AIDS, rather than finding hope in the love that these two men shared (Clum 63-4). In part, Clum’s criticism is valid. Nevertheless, within the context of the play’s creation, I doubt that Kramer was able to see any hope. The numbers of infected were rising exponentially, the GMHC was still not issuing information about safe sex, and the President of the United States had not uttered a single word about the disease. How did Clum expect the play to end?
While Clum takes issue with the dramatic choices made by Kramer, British scholar Alan Sinfeld’s criticisms of *The Normal Heart* hearken back to those of *Faggots*. Sinfeld feels that the major flaw of the play is Kramer’s inability to accept gay men as they are. He argues that Ned Weeks constantly looks for societal, and therefore heterosexual approval. Sinfeld believes that this need for approval influences the choice of successful, white, straight-acting gay men to head the fictional AIDS organization. One cannot help but read a criticism of Kramer’s actions and beliefs in this argument. Addressing Kramer’s activism in his text *Out on Stage*, Sinfeld acknowledges that desperate times may have called for desperate measures, but takes issue with Kramer’s criticism of the gay community. He believes that Kramer would have been more successful if he had taken issue with those in power and not spent so much time trying to curb promiscuity within gay culture (321-2). While I understand his critique of *The Normal Heart*, one senses that Sinfeld is not familiar with Kramer’s activist writings. Larry Kramer does censur e those in power, consistently, but he also believes that the fight against AIDS cannot be won unless the affected community recognizes the danger and threat that their continued decadent behavior poses. This statement from St. Martin’s Press senior editor Michael Denneny encapsulates the lasting power of *The Normal Heart*:

> This is why I believe that Larry Kramer is one of the most important writers of our time. His work has borne witness to the despair, death, and destruction that almost swept away the gay community. His example makes clear to us that language is an act…At root the act of language is the act of witnessing. (qtd. in Mass 187)
The play still resonates and moves readers and audiences through the language of Larry Kramer, the prose that allows the anxiety, grief, and frustration of the early years of the AIDS epidemic to speak to modern audiences. *The Normal Heart* was the synthesis of Kramer’s multiple personas into one theatrical representation: the gay man on the outside of cultural practice and the angry activist speaking from outside the accepted political stance. The dual reactions of the reader to Ned Weeks—frustration and empathy—afford this character an agency not given to *Faggots’* Fred Lemish. Larry Kramer’s *The Normal Heart* permanently affixed him as the outsider, a perceived public persona that continues today.
CONCLUSION: GROW UP, BEHAVE RESPONSIBLY, FIGHT FOR YOUR RIGHTS.

Larry Kramer’s role within the gay community is complex—he functions as both an insightful activist and vicious critic, always speaking from a position outside the mainstream. From his controversial first novel, Faggots to his commercially successful play, The Normal Heart, Kramer has used creative outlets to navigate his changing status in society. His place within gay culture has been one of duality, that of a man criticized yet celebrated, reviled yet beloved. The Larry Kramer who burst onto the literary scene with Faggots in 1978 was a wholly different man than the one who presented The Normal Heart for Public Theatre audiences in 1985. Within this project I have explored how Kramer’s outsider position existed within the three layers of persona articulated by Auslander and Frith. Larry Kramer became an outsider with the publication of Faggots, an event which led to tension as he functioned within yet fought against that space and its limitations. Kramer’s rhetorical strategies in his various works show how he negotiated his outsider role within these different layers of persona.

Faggots marked Kramer’s emergence into the newly sexually liberated gay culture along with other notable writers, such as Andrew Holleran and Edmund White. Unlike many other writers of gay male fiction during the hedonistic 1970s, Larry Kramer approached his work with a satirical eye. His novel was a farcical adventure through the decadent New York gay ghetto. But at the heart of the story was his protagonist’s quest to find himself amongst the sex, drugs, and party scene. Fred Lemish was Kramer’s first use of an alter-ego protagonist in his writings, an anagram of “himself.”

This cleansing of emotion through the written word becomes a common theme when examining the writings of Larry Kramer. So does controversy. Faggots caused
an outrage within the gay community. Many were horrified with the frank descriptions of
sexual activity and felt that Kramer was judging their actions. Others felt that Lemish’s
choice to leave the ghetto at the end of the novel was Kramer’s way of lecturing gay
men about promiscuity. This tension between Kramer’s intent and subsequent critical
readings of his works is common. Critics often do not read Kramer’s works without
providing the cultural events that informed his writings. The importance of socio-political
events to Kramer’s writings takes precedence with his activist texts.

I have included only a few examples of Kramer’s activist speeches and editorials
for analysis due to the scope of this study. The included are representative of the
development of Kramer’s public persona, a performed “role” that Kramer still embodies
today. I discussed these texts within the historical events driving Kramer’s growing
activism—the government’s lack of response to the early AIDS crisis, as well as how
Kramer negotiated his public and private personas. Larry Kramer developed a public
persona that was a performance upon the bully pulpit. In opposition to this emerging
image of Larry Kramer, there was the private man who counted many of his public
enemies as friends or lovers. This split personality of Larry Kramer and the multiple
readings applied to his activist writings intrigues me. He could be acrimonious in print
and still considered many of those he castigated as friends, and they did not take his
attacks personally. He betrays his own text; the works can be read on many levels
depending on which aspect of Larry Kramer one acknowledges.

The work that solidified Kramer’s acceptance of his outsider role and articulated
his acknowledgment that he would never be within the mainstream of queer culture and
politics was *The Normal Heart*. Once again he used the written text to exorcise his
demons, relating his rise and fall within the Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC). This was a break that signaled both public humiliation and the loss of agency. The autobiographical protagonist Ned Weeks is similar to Fred Lemish but with a confidence and certainty that was lacking in *Faggots*. Ned Weeks endures the trials and humiliations that Kramer faced as well as a romantic subplot and at the play’s dénouement he is an outcast. Unlike Kramer’s reaction to the fallout with the GMHC, there are no added histrionics, no public pleas for re-admittance, and only an acceptance of his state. Ned Weeks is the “character” aspect of his persona and provided Larry Kramer the opportunity to embrace his outsider role. Larry Kramer once again became the outsider of gay culture and AIDS activism following the opening of *The Normal Heart*. The character of Ned Weeks helped to shape the public persona of Larry Kramer that exists today.

Larry Kramer continues to thrive, write, and cause controversy today and that is why this analysis of his outsider persona has relevance. Kramer’s work continues yet his public interactions reached their zenith in efficacy and viciousness in the years following *The Normal Heart*. His acceptance of his outsider role has allowed Kramer’s activism and writings to reach a new level—even as he realized that his actions would always cause controversy. As Kramer says:

> We are not taken seriously as writers because we are activists…I would much rather be thought of as a good writer than as a good activist. And I think my writing is good. But my writing never gets reviewed. I get reviewed. And that begins to grate after awhile.
It’s not *Just Say No* or *The Normal Heart*. It’s the loud-mouthed Larry sounding off again. And it’s hard. (Wieder)

Kramer understands that his works function on multiple levels, and he knows that he must negotiate rhetorical strategies. This is clearly frustrating for him but he does not back down from that challenge.

One of Kramer’s greatest antagonists was President Ronald Reagan. Kramer viewed him as personally responsible for the devastation AIDS caused within the gay community before the federal government began allocating research funds. When the former President died in 2004, many critics remained silent, respectful of the man in the immediate wake of his death. Larry Kramer, however, published a biting editorial in the popular gay magazine, *The Advocate*. The piece was entitled “Adolph Reagan” and caused an uproar among both readers and gay pundits:

Ronald Reagan did not even say the word “AIDS” out loud for the first seven years of his reign. Because of this some 70 million people, so far, have become infected with HIV/AIDS…I wonder what it felt like while he was alive to ponder this. For surely he must have thought about it. How could he not? He has been called the consummate actor who came to believe all his lines. Does this not make his legacy even more grotesque? Hitler knew what he was doing. How could Ronald Reagan not have known what he was doing? But of course no one is writing about this. Reagan too is one of history’s gods. So far he has got away with murder. (Kramer, “Adolph Reagan”)
Angry responses from gay men poured into the magazine. The letters took Kramer to task for attacking a dead man, for relying on histrionics and conjecture, and for refusing to point out the gay community’s responsibility during the AIDS crisis. Many of these criticisms are understandable and I agree with certain well-made points, but the constant refrain for blame to be placed upon the gay community seems strange. Did the magazine’s readers not realize who authored the article? Larry Kramer spent the 1980s berating the gay community and queer leaders for overlooking the promiscuity and hedonism that allowed AIDS to gain a foothold among gay men. Larry Kramer, in addition, received countless criticisms for speaking out about sexual behavior. It seems that Kramer’s statement is correct. No matter what he writes he is constantly being criticized for who he is, reproached by the public as a loudmouth.

One of these criticisms against Kramer appeared in an editorial by gay conservative, Andrew Sullivan. Sullivan is also accustomed to inciting controversy. His moral and political leanings are in opposition to many queer leaders, and he too has been labeled a hypocrite. In his response titled “Reagan did not give me HIV,” Sullivan writes:

This notion, as Larry absurdly writes, that Reagan ‘murdered’ every gay man with HIV is patently ludicrous. Comparing his negligence to Adolf Hitler’s holocaust is an insult to the dead of the Shoah…To say that there is no difference between negligence in the face of natural disaster and calculated mass murder is sophomoric.

(Sullivan)
I include Sullivan’s response because he and Larry Kramer are often compared as gay political conservatives, a label that is hardly applicable to Kramer. Both men are white, educated, and HIV positive. Both reach large audiences with their writings and speeches. Even those with whom Kramer is most often compared take sides against his position in public, denigrating his subjective editorial. This harsh criticism of Kramer serves as an example for how his persona functions within gay culture. Larry Kramer remains an outsider even in 2005. His public persona and the strong rhetoric he uses have not mellowed over time. Neither has the automatic criticism he inspires. He articulated in a 1999 interview:

I don’t feel the support of a concerned community…I was the pariah for so many years, then I was the prophet, and everybody loved me. Now I’m the pariah again. Everything I do, they hate. I haven’t said anything different since day one. (Wieder)

If Kramer believes that nothing has changed since the publication of Faggots then how can this study, this analysis of selected texts of Larry Kramer, move forward? While there are numerous directions that this study could explore, I offer three paths that might use this text as a starting point. I believe these three research questions would be supported using Kramer’s outsider persona that I have explored.

The most obvious continuation of this text is to explore Kramer’s persona(s) and outsider status in his later works of activism and writing. Later plays he has written include Just Say No (1988), a stinging satire of Reagan and the First family, and The Destiny of Me (1992), the story of Ned Weeks years
after the events of *The Normal Heart*. *The Destiny of Me* continues Kramer’s inclusion of autobiographical characters within his works.

His activist writings and public persona altered considerably in the years after *The Normal Heart* with the formation of AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT-UP). This organization employed guerrilla tactics, rather than the bureaucratic methods of the GMHC, and mobilized a younger generation. This type of study would explore questions similar to those in this paper, but with an expanded timeline.

A similar study to arise from this work is an in-depth study of other biographical characters included in Kramer’s works, to explore their role within Kramer’s life and how they were portrayed for public consumption. One such character is Larry Kramer’s brother Arthur, who appears in some form in all of Kramer’s autobiographical works and played a role in his activist activities. *The Normal Heart* examines the larger gay issue of longing for familial and societal acceptance but *The Destiny of Me* offers a closer examination of Kramer’s own family dynamic. Arthur Kramer often stands in for “heterosexual society” and the dynamic between the two brothers sheds light upon Kramer’s tenuous relationship with the larger culture. The constant presence of his brother within his texts reinforces a less frequently articulated, yet common thread within all of Kramer’s writings: the need for community and family. Kramer’s parents had passed away before *The Normal Heart*, but it is not until *The Destiny of Me* that he dramatizes his relationships with his mother and father. *Faggots* offered a
brief glimpse into his strained parental relationships, and how those connections affected his persona.

Finally, the gay community’s hostile treatment of much of Kramer’s work has bled into the academic community’s examination of his works. The final extension of this work would be a study of how Kramer’s rhetoric has influenced critical studies of his works. How often do critics review Larry Kramer’s politics instead of allowing the works to stand alone? One method for approaching this subject would be to compare Larry Kramer to his contemporaries, to explore how the works of his peers have been reviewed and studied. The focus of this argument would be how the personas of other gay men have created multiple readings of important gay male and AIDS texts.

With this thesis, I have argued that in order to fully understand and appreciate Larry Kramer’s works one has to read them with knowledge of Kramer’s persona/s/. Cultural context must be explored in order to have a successful understanding of the author’s impact and the critical response. I have analyzed select writings of Larry Kramer in order to understand how his public persona has affected his rhetoric throughout the years and how it has influenced readings of his works. I have argued that Larry Kramer’s status as an outsider within the gay community was not an ever-present label, but a role he accepted publicly, privately, and finally even within his autobiographical texts.


Mass, Lawrence D, ed. We Must Love One Another or Die: The Life and Legacies of Larry Kramer. New York: St. Martin’s, 1997.


