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The Boys on the Beach: Andrew Holleran's Fire Island

Abstract (english): This article discusses the relationship between the beach culture of Fire Island, a famous gay vacation spot, in the 1970s, and a mode of tragic fatalism that is traditionally associated with gay literature. It brings these concerns together by examining Andrew Holleran's 1978 Fire Island novel *Dancer from the Dance*, where "death and desire" are placed in a constitutive bind. It concludes by suggesting that the beach offers a fertile analogy for considering the historical re-emergence of particular corporeal tropes in accounts of gay life, suggesting that Holleran's novel is haunted not only by what has preceded it, such as W.H. Auden's 1948 poem "Pleasure Island" but, more uncannily, by the devastation of the HIV/AIDS epidemic that followed in the 1980s.

Abstract (deutsch): Der vorliegende Aufsatz verhandelt das Verhältnis zwischen der Strandkultur von Fire Island in den 1970er Jahren - einem damals bei Schwulen besonders beliebten Urlaubsort - und einem Modus des tragischen Fatalismus, der traditionell mit schwuler Literatur assoziiert wird. Diese beiden Themen werden anhand einer Lektüre von Andrew Hollerans Fire Island-Roman *Dancer from the Dance* (1978) verknüpft, in welchem "Tod und Begehren" in eine grundlegende Verbindung zueinander gesetzt werden. Am Ende des Aufsatzes steht die Schlussfolgerung, dass der Strand eine fruchtbare Analogie für die Betrachtung der Rückkehr besonderer körperlicher Tropen in Darstellungen des schwulen Lebens bietet, und dass Hollerans Roman nicht nur von dem heimgesucht wird, was ihm zeitlich vorausging, wie etwa W. H. Audens Gedicht "Pleasure Island" von 1948, sondern - umso unheimlicher - auch von der verheerenden HIV/AIDS Epidemie, die in den 1980er Jahren folgen sollte.

Recalling summers spent in the 1970s and 80s on the beach at Fire Island Pines, a gay vacation spot around fifty miles away from New York City, the American photographer Tom Bianchi writes:

> Over the years, I chronicled a cultural phenomenon – an awakening – as more and more gay men found gyms and transformed themselves into our collective sexual fantasies. Early each season I'd see men on the beach, emerging newly buff after a winter in a New York gym. Most of us had suffered boyhoods as secret or not so secret sissies. The demonstration of physical beauty and strength was a natural part of the gay pride movement, then in full throttle. Many who had the desire to do it, discovered they could create themselves. When the transformation was coupled with an intelligent generous spirit, the result was fine indeed. What some saw as narcissism, I saw as healthy self-regard – no need to apologize for our personal and cultural transformation. (Bianchi 2013, 16)

Bianchi's celebratory account of beach body culture and its "natural" relation to "gay pride" is disarmingly simple, its only caveat being the nature of the "intelligent generous spirit" which ensured the order of the day was "healthy self-regard" instead of "narcissism". What such generosity might mean in this context is left unsaid, and Bianchi's Polaroid images of men on Fire Island attest to a milieu that seems by design exceptional rather than inclusive, its primary commitment being to "physical beauty", populated by chiselled Adonis types. Bianchi's account is appealing, at least, for so eagerly providing a positive spin upon the standards of this culture. It rehearses a defence of beauty that he has made throughout his photographic career, suggesting that these macho transformations are acts of defiance, mutually affirming responses to the shame and suffering of repressed "boyhoods". A highly aesthetic photographer of the male body, Bianchi seems unfazed in this recollection by the theoretical warfare which surrounds the gay-macho style he is known for capturing. When invoking the

gendered nature of this performance, which substitutes a “buff”, athletic masculinity in place of the feminised abjection of the sissy boy, Bianchi stops short of considering this as a subversive practice that toys with gender norms. But neither does he trouble over the opposing critique, of which Leo Bersani’s essay “Is The Rectum A Grave?” is perhaps the classic example. Bersani argues that the gay-macho style, centred around “looks” and “muscles”, failed to transcend its own reverence for machismo and thus have any tangible “effects” on “the heterosexual world that provides the models” upon which it is based (Bersani 1987, 207). Instead, it risks “complicities with a brutal and misogynous ideal of masculinity” (206), the same oppressive ideal that propagates derogatory terms like “sissy” in the first place.

The beach body is thus a site of contested meanings in the years following gay liberation, and no doubt involves some *un*healthy forms of self-regard, too. These meanings were further confounded by the ravages wrought upon the body by the HIV/AIDS crisis during the 1980s, when the emaciation of illness became a ubiquitous body type in the gay community. In this regard Bianchi’s photographs seem resolutely *pre*-AIDS, for there is a simplicity in their devotion to pleasure, and they possess the idyllic valence of the calm before a storm, ripe for nostalgic appropriation as tantalising glimpses of the utopic. As a form of visual documentary, they register as a retro iteration of what the sociologist Henning Bech describes as a “stock theme” in the “homosexual experience”, the sense that happiness is located somewhere on the horizon, in “another country”, a place both real and imagined, with a landscape “appropriate to pleasure and play” (Bech 1997, 37). This gay pastoralism infuses Bianchi’s images, for it is not only bodily ideals that they convey but the ideal of the natural paradise, the clear skies and sandy beaches of Fire Island, offering plentiful spaces for acts of cruising and dancing. The utopic resonance of Bianchi’s visual record is thus not only palpable retrospectively, as the product of a post-AIDS vantage, but also relates to Fire Island’s long-standing associations as a refuge from the everyday, a place which each summer would play host, away from the potential hostility of the dominant culture, to the community’s “awakening”. Such a place then sustains an illusion of exemption not only from the political restrictions or inequities of the mainland, but other forms of drudgery or labour that underpin that place’s functioning. The beach foregrounds the spectacle of having the right kind of body whilst simultaneously obscuring, as a space of leisure, the exertion involved in obtaining it, just as the “winter in a New York gym” is excluded from Bianchi’s showcase of the results. The labour-intensive *how* and the potentially problematic *why* of such bodily transformations are only ever implicit in these images, which are absorbed instead in the sheer beauty of the *what*, the sculpted male body as a corporeal *a priori* that seems part and parcel of the naturally beautiful setting. As such, they only tell a part of the story.

Compare, for example, Bianchi's account of gym-going to the following moment from Andrew Holleran's 1978 novel *Dancer from the Dance*, where the narrator recalls

> [the] summer gym shorts had become fashionable as bathing suits, the summer Frank Post (who each spring contemplated suicide because he could not rise to the occasion – of being the most voluptuous, beautiful man on the Island, the homosexual myth everyone adored – but managed to go to the gym, take his pills, and master yet another season) shaved his body and wore jockstraps to Tea Dance, and his lover died of an overdose of Angel Dust and Quaaludes. (Holleran 1990 [1978], 31)

Appropriating the syntax of fashion, this passage measures memories by "season" and describes annual shifts in what is "fashionable", diffusing the charge of its more serious moments, which lose their significance when rendered as so many entries in a list of transient tastes. The effect of such a list is that the differences between its formulaically brief units are elided, suggesting an unquestioned simultaneity where trends in "bathing suits" and the shadow of "suicide" co-exist. Frank Post's serial contemplation of killing himself while working on his beach body forms the larger part of his description but is written as a long parenthetical aside, as if offering a glimpse behind the scenes of what is taken as given "every spring", an impulse that arises like clockwork amid changing vogues. It might read merely as comically overwrought, a campy exaggeration of priorities that is meant no more seriously than the vogue of "gym shorts", were it not for the revelation that Post's lover "died of an overdose". This is the kind of fatality that is perhaps ambiguously suicidal, and it inflects Post's earlier contemplation with a retrospective gravity. Punctuated by death, this passage offers an altogether different account of "personal and cultural transformation" to Bianchi's, illuminating how this impulse toward transformation might in turn be destructive, or lead to destruction. Whilst it is in one sense oriented toward a future ("yet another season"), Post's desire to "rise to the occasion" seems simultaneously to risk annihilation, thus foregoing futurity altogether.

Lee Edelman offers a critique of futurity as an aping of the temporality of reproduction, a heterosexual bedrock which the oppositional category of queer eschews. Instead, he foregrounds the psychoanalytic trope of the death drive as a figure for this form of queer "no future" (Edelman 2004). On the subject of Alfred Hitchcock's film *The Birds*, Edelman writes that the film "claws at our faith in the future, at the generative grammar of generation, by coming instead at the death drive, in the grip of which, insofar as we come, we thereby come to naught – or come […] to a place like Bodega Bay" (Edelman 2004, 33). The coastal setting of Hitchcock's film is defined, "as if allegorically, in opposition to San Francisco, the sophisticated urban center", the ideal destination for a "pair of lovebirds" that in theory "might stand for the concept of natural beauty" (although, Edelman writes, Hitchcock's disruptive cinematic style disrupts such a substitution). This assertion that such a place might "in the end" be the ideal home for the grip of the "death drive" offers a way of looking at Fire Island, a place of "natural beauty" frequented by "lovebirds" of a particular (and less domestically

minded) kind; a place allegorically proposed “in opposition” to New York and which in Holleran’s prose is linked with destructive or suicidal urges. The narrator of *Dancer from the Dance* earlier describes the island as “nothing but a sandbar, as slim as a parenthesis, enclosing the Atlantic, the very last fringe of soil on which a man might put up his house, and leave behind him all – absolutely all – of that huge continent to the west” (Holleran 1990 [1978], 24). This description is alive to the precariousness of the place, its diminutive topography and geographical marginality meeting with an implicit inclination toward negation and finality: “nothing”, “the very last”, leaving “behind”. In this regard, such a place might seem analogously suited to the contemplated finality of “coming to naught”, even if this fatalism is spurred by the desire, ironically, to be more, to be in one’s body desirably “voluptuous” as opposed to “slim as a parenthesis.”

Taking the Fire Island beach as its focus, this article will address several things. Firstly, it will suggest that *Dancer from the Dance* asks us to take seriously the notion that the culture of the beach body is a matter of life and death for gay men on Fire Island in the 1970s. Secondly, it will contend that, as the site where the body is showcased and exposed, Fire Island and by extension the space of the beach more generally make this peculiar sense of morbidity legible. The narrator’s recollections of Frank Post and his dead lover occur in a reverie that is spurred on by a “sudden wish to feast on the past” and takes place from vantage of “the steps leading to the beach” (Holleran 1990 [1978], 30). In this section of the novel (examined in more detail below), the beach is cast as a landscape that emphasises the close relationship between “death and desire” (31). Holleran’s fixation upon such morbidity raises other questions about the moral presumptions of this novel, which in some respects appears to suggest that both gay male sexuality, and the attendant work involved in obtaining a sexually desirable body, are synonymous with a sense of doom. Although this is rooted in characters’ anxieties about physical beauty and aging, it also feels eerily proleptic of the age of HIV/AIDS, when the relation between “death and desire” came to be framed as a constitutive part of the disease, a moralistic projection of death as a consequence of reckless sexual activity. In this sense Holleran’s novel has something in common with Larry Kramer’s *Faggots*, which was published the same year and loudly derided by many gay readers for its perceived moralism with regards to sex and promiscuity. Accounting for the similar and different ways Holleran and Kramer treat these issues would be the remit of another article, but suffice it to say here that both novels express a set of pessimistic reservations about the sexual culture of the post-Stonewall 70s, and both feature a dramatic denouement on Fire Island where such pessimisms play out. I will conclude by suggesting that this crux of concerns is not unique to Holleran’s work, or even this period of writing about Fire Island. W.H. Auden’s 1948 poem “Pleasure Island”, for example, paints a similar picture. Such echoes before and after the historical moment of

Dancer from the Dance point to the beach's particular resonance for reflecting upon the vexed corporeal tropes of gay life.

A Visual People

Dancer from the Dance is structured around a novel-within-a-novel called *Wild Swans*, which is narrated by an unnamed denizen of the New York gay scene who introduces the novel through a series of framing letters to Paul, a friend who has vacated the city for a quieter life in the Deep South. The opening of *Wild Swans* begins after the events of its denouement, and sees the narrator returning to Fire Island in the "last week of October" (Holleran 1990 [1978], 23) to collect the possessions of Malone, the novel's protagonist, who was last seen wading "into the bay" at a Fire Island party that summer (232). This episode's water-side vantage, late October setting and maudlin fixation upon the passing of time are evidently borrowed from the poem that provides *Wild Swans* with its title, W.B. Yeats's 1919 "The Wild Swans at Coole", and the Fire Island beach is here figured as a haunted space, ushering in a funereal pageant of summers past. As for Malone, numerous fates are suggested; whether his disappearance was a suicidal act, whether he survived, or whether he made it back to the city but then died in a fire at the Everard Baths, all remain unknown. A closeted corporate lawyer from Ohio, Malone first moves to New York in the early 1970s in search of love. After a tempestuous love affair with Frankie, a married man from New Jersey, he is swept up by the campy older queen Sutherland, who helps him become a darling of the scene, a prodigiously handsome realization of the community's desires. By the end of the novel, he is a disillusioned escort who feels he has wasted his life searching for love in an environment devoted above all to youth and pleasure. Although his final words before swimming away suggest that he plans to go "out west" to "some little town in Idaho", the narrator worries as to Malone's urges, having heard "his reflections on the young man who had killed himself in Manhattan that afternoon" (232). Graphic talk of a young man's suicide had dominated beach conversations earlier in the chapter; talk of a "boy from Idaho – who had slashed his wrists, and then his throat, and then hurled himself nine floors from the top of his apartment building to the steaming pavement below on this hottest of all hot afternoons" (220).

Among several more or less ambiguous suicides referred to throughout the novel, which include numerous drug overdoses and the case of "a nameless ribbon clerk" who died from sniffing "a popper at the bottom of a pool" (32), the stark case of the "boy from Idaho" casts the longest shadow, and has Malone reflecting that "When we're all so terribly alone" the "least we can do in this life is love one another" (221). His own disappearance is shot through with the fatalism of this earlier suicide, and in this light his choice of "Idaho" as the generic town

"out west" to which he claims to be fleeing feels deliberate, offering the suggestion that he might follow in the footsteps of the young man who hailed from there. Just as Malone's disappearance is positioned in relation to an event preceding it, the morbid return to Fire Island at the opening of *Wild Swans* is re-contextualised by this ending, which chronologically precedes it. For this reason, and for the sake of clarity, this article will examine examples from the novel in the chronological order of their unfolding. Although this goes against the novel's structure, it is my contention that its ending casts light upon the spectral textures of its opening, and provides a narrative context for the co-presence of "death and desire" that so infuses the narrator's recollection on the beach. Approaching examples in this order is also consonant with the principle of syntactical retroactivity that runs throughout, where clauses in the narrator's lists inflect and re-contextualise what has come before, often turning the trivial into the tragic. Frank Post's contemplation of suicide, for example, loses its comic resonance when listed alongside his lover's overdose.

The eighth and final chapter of *Wild Swans* takes place on Fire Island, a place "for madness, for hot nights, kisses, and herds of stunning men: a national game preserve annually replenished" (206-7). This description of the island's corporeality pre-empts Malone's melancholic diatribe, addressed to John Schaeffer, a young man vying for his affections, later that evening at the party:

> "You must remember one thing, if I can leave you with anything, if my years out here can benefit you at all, then let it be with this. Never forget that all these people are primarily a visual people. They are designers, window dressers, models, photographers, graphic artists. They design the windows at Saks. Do you understand? They are a visual people, they value the eye, and their sins, as Saint Augustine said, are the sins of the eye. And being people who live on the surface of the eye, they cannot be expected to have minds or hearts. It sounds absurd but it's that simple. Everything is beautiful here, and that is all it is: beautiful. Do not expect anything else, do not expect nourishment for anything but your eye." (228)

A great deal of work is done here by the phrase "all it is", holding within it the suggestion that a given virtue is sacrificed when it becomes "all" an object is. Something that is only beautiful, it suggests, is in fact not beautiful at all. Malone is hardly the first thinker to get here; his statement rehearses an age-old "political critique" which, Elaine Scarry writes, "urges that beauty, by preoccupying our attention, distracts attention from wrong social arrangements" and "makes us inattentive, and therefore eventually indifferent, to the project of bringing about arrangements that are just" (Scarry 1999, 58). Contrary to Scarry's well-known debunking of such an argument through the idea that "perceiving beauty confers" on both the perceiver and on the object the "gift of life" (90), Malone, who has often been both object and perceiver, sees only beauty's lack of affective substance, its visuality over vitality, its spurning of justice, of "minds and hearts". Fire Island nourishes the *eye*, not the *I*; as Malone pondered earlier that afternoon, upon seeing a beautiful boy in the park, beauty had become "an impersonal fact,

as impersonal as the beauty of a tree, or a sky, or a seacoast" (Holleran 1990 [1978], 214), catalysing his decision to leave behind the life he has been living.

It is in these climactic moments that *Dancer from the Dance* recalls F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, a classic intertextual shorthand for the diagnosis of a lifestyle that favours style over substance (Schopp 2016). Edmund White once stated that Holleran's novel "accomplished for the 1970s" what Fitzgerald's did "for the 1920s … the glamorization of a decade and a culture" (Holleran 1990 [1978], book jacket). If such a claim seems at odds with Malone's disillusioned lament, it is worth noting that this lament is rooted in his own exclusion from a way of life that had before both protected and beguiled him. Your invite may get lost in the post, but the party will continue to be beautiful. This is why, when stood facing the island's "impersonal […] sea-coast", he and "people he had known for years […] were looking at the new faces" at the party "with an odd sensation of death, for they had all been new faces once" (Holleran 1990 [1978], 226). What Malone's demise turns upon is ultimately an anticipated failure in looking, not only the failure to maintain the good looks and physical form required to be a "star" of the island, nor the failure to look good enough "to get any of these stars into bed" (226), but a failure to look upon the island's beauties and feel anything, to obtain what Scarry identifies as "the gift of life." This exclusion from the spoils of a transient culture, the novel's conclusion suggests, is tantamount to death, which is why Malone disappears before he can be made invisible.

Death and Desire

Some months later at the novel's "beginning", upon his return to Fire Island to sort Malone's possessions, the narrator reflects upon those "boys in New York whose lovers die of drugs, and who give the dead lover's clothes to their new lover without a second thought" (Holleran 1990 [1978], 29). Walking through the house, he thinks of the "succession of houseboys" who "had passed through the place "and been "replaced as casually as fuses", including "a dancer from Iowa" who "had been discovered renting rooms to strangers for fifty dollars a day during the week" and "later had his head blown off on St. Marks Place by a Mafia hit man when he started a new career as a drug dealer; his funeral had been more glittering than any party of the winter" (29). This past as conjured up by the silent house is mediated, like the world of "visual people", by a callous economy of replacement, where the clothes of the dead quickly find new wearers and the houseboys are as interchangeable as "fuses". The story of the dead house-boy gestures to a milieu outside of the novel's gaze, a realm of precarious work and criminality which the relatively moneyed protagonists seem largely distant from. He is invoked, like many of the sentence-long cameo roles in *Dancer*, in relation to his hometown. The

"dancer from Iowa" who met a grisly end; it is in these compact, even throwaway instances that Holleran's prose seems to engage the mode of the obituary, glimpsing momentarily at the back-story of a lost life. And like most of the deaths in the novel, the demise of the houseboy is also brought flippantly into the service of the scene's larger glamour, his send-off a "glittering" substitute for a winter party.

Moving through the house to the beach, the narrator describes that the reason "I loved the beach in autumn […] was that now the false social organism had vanished and left it what Malone had always wished it to be: a fishing village, in which, presumably, no one lied to one another" (30). The turn of the season replaces Fire Island's very ecosystem, from party-town to pastoral, from a "false social organism" to a wholesome, honest desertedness that is all the better for reflection:

> A sudden wish to feast on the past made me sit down on the steps leading to the beach for a moment, the steps where in the hot August sunlight we had rested our feet from the burning sand and shaded our eyes to look out at the figures in the dazzling light. There had been a dwarf that summer, a squat hydrocephalic woman who wandered up and down the beach among those handsome young men like a figure in an allegory. And there had been the Viet Nam veteran who had lost a leg, and walked along the water's edge in a leather jacket in the hottest weather, hobbling with a cane. He had drowned that Sunday so many swimmers had drowned. Not twenty feet from the steps on which I sat now, a corpse had lain all afternoon beneath a sheet because the police were too busy to remove it, and five feet away from the corpse, people lay taking the sun and admiring a man who had just given the kiss of life to a young boy. Death and desire, death and desire. (30-31)

This is one of the strangest moments in *Dancer from the Dance*. By introducing incongruous figures whose presences are avowedly allegorical, the narrator employs the spectacle of the freak show to create a more general sense of dread. Concisely, these figures invoke the political realities of deformation, disability and war, forms of difficulty and conflict which seem outside of the novel's universe. The "squat hydrocephalic" woman and the "Viet Nam veteran" both seem as if they are borrowed from another time and place, or another discourse altogether, like a pulp novel or a sensational news story. They are in this sense deviant bodies, which is to say you would not find them in a photograph by Tom Bianchi, and in this moment, they serve to disrupt the beach's worship of youth and virility (in which able-bodied-ness is taken as given) by offering palpable signs of the body's vulnerability. Yet these intrusions are also unable to penetrate the surface and the beach community's love thereof. Beyond it, the police are "too busy" with some other emergency, too busy to remove the corpse of an amputee, a dead body whose presence is little more than an inconvenience in the face of more appealing spectacles, like the "man who had just given the kiss of life to a young boy".

Whilst the elegiac mood of this reflection is rooted in the context of Malone's disappearance, it also seems to identify, more synoptically, a larger, more sordid sense of doom at the Fire Island beach. The community's apparent predilection for death and destruction is here given

sinister, symbolic form right under its nose, but people are too busy sun-bathing to notice. It also speaks to the narrator's admission, in one of the framing letters which closes *Dancer*, of the novel's own circumspection:

> That day we marched to Central Park and found ourselves in a sea of humanity, how stunned I was to recognise no more than four or five faces? (Of course our friends were all at the beach, darling; they couldn't be bothered to come in and make a political statement.) (249)

The beach here becomes idiomatic for a certain leisurely apathy, a glamorous reprieve from the banal work of political engagement. This moment somewhat disturbs the novel's own mythologization of gay life by exposing the specificity of its plot, which mostly renders a whole way of life in broad and tragic terms but in fact, as admitted here, represents just one beach from amidst a "sea of humanity." There were so many other "men in that city who weren't on the circuit, who didn't dance, didn't cruise, didn't fall in love with Malone […] We never saw them" (249). The tragedy of *Wild Swans* thus becomes one of a community, or one part of a community, intoxicated by its own pathos: as Paul, the narrator's epistolary interlocutor writes in an introductory letter, the "world demands that gay life, like the life of the Very Rich, be ultimately sad, for everyone in this country believes, down deep in their heart, that to be happy you must have a two-story house in the suburbs and a FAMILY" (15). The men seeking to approximate such domesticity are among those the narrator "never saw", forced out of view like the rest of the world, and this binary between the domestic and the destructive implies, in a sex-negative manner, that the sadness felt by the novel's characters is somehow inherent to an outgoing and promiscuous way of living. This is the central ambivalence of *Dancer from the Dance*, a novel which seems to be eulogising a way of life, rendered as tragic and therefore beautiful, whilst also remaining suspicious of that way of life and its perceived irresponsibility. Andrew Schopp argues that Paul's delineation of "the addictive consequences that result when one allows the frame within which one lives to determine one's existence" should be used to defend Holleran's novel from "critiques" which "disregard the message inherent in Malone's rejection of that life and in Paul's final missive", thus "ignor[ing] the novel's irony" (Schopp 2016, 169-170). Whilst the novel's late-hour acknowledgment of the world outside it, and of the previously unknown capaciousness of the world inside it, serves to undercut some of its cautionary melancholy, it feels overly generous to suggest that showing awareness of a cliché offers exemption from that cliché's reactionary hold. In other words, can the value-system of a novel that suggests a profound relation between death and desire, a relation given allegorical shape by figures of abject deformity and militarised death, be accounted for by "irony" alone?

The Boys on the Beach

Holleran is not the first writer to light upon a connection between the body cult of Fire Island and broader ills. During the late 1940s, W.H. Auden summered for several years in Cherry Grove, a neighbouring gay community to the west of Fire Island Pines (the two are separated by the Meat Rack, an infamous wooded cruising spot). Auden's 1948 poem on the subject, "Pleasure Island", tells a familiar story of "an outpost where nothing is wicked / But to be sorry or sick" (Auden 1976, 266). The poem centres upon a temptation scene, and charts the fate of a well-intentioned visitor who is seen

> […] improving his mind
> On the beach with a book, but the dozing
> Afternoon is opposed
> To rhyme and reason and chamber music,
> The plain sun has no use
> For the printing press, the wheel, the electric
> Light, and the waves reject
> Sympathy: soon he gives in, stops stopping
> To think, lets his book drop
> And lies, like us, on his stomach watching
> As bosom, backside, crotch
> Or other sacred trophy is borne in triumph
> Past his adoring by
> Souls he does not try to like; then, getting
> Up, gives all to the wet
> Clasps of the sea or surrenders his scruples
> To some great gross braying group
> That will be drunk till Fall. The tide rises
> And falls […] (Auden 1976, 266)

There's a self-reflexive quality to the voice narrating this scene; we don't know much about the "us", the community of voyeuristic bathers into which this unwitting writer is initiated, but the poem makes conceivable that perhaps they were once writers too, subject to this same fate of surrendering to revelry "till Fall". By taking up the American English word for autumn, Auden also introduces, somewhat histrionically, a Biblical valence to this transgression of scruples, consonant with what Richard Bozorth identifies as the poem's "unironized Christian mythos, in which life devoted […] to sexual bliss is not paradise but hell" (Bozorth 2001, 242). One of the beach lifestyle's greatest sins, after all, is its lack of substance, privileging "bosom" over "book". In this sense Auden's poem resembles Sutherland's account of what distinguishes the beaches of Fire Island from those of the Hamptons, where the "homosexuals tended to be fatter, older, and attired in pastel-colored slacks", but "they could at least discuss […] Samuel Beckett, or the latest novel of Iris Murdoch" (Holleran 1990 [1978], 207). Fire Island is a place where the intellect goes to die, where even the educated succumb to its deleterious effects, and Holleran later recalls being both observer and participant in a culture where the "thing that had not seemed important at Harvard – the body – was now crucial". Where he once would have "wondered what Henry James had meant in *The Ambassadors*", Holleran was now "wondering how to combine brewers' yeast with my morning milkshake

because I needed extra protein for the body-building I was doing at the gym" (Holleran 2018 [1994], 144-145).

This substitution of bodies for books has become a standard joke in representations of Fire Island, made up of works that inhabit the ironic position of rendering textually, from the perspective of a participant, a place that is supposedly anti-literary, a place which distracts you from "improving" your "mind." The speaker of "Pleasure Island" is hardly agnostic about this trade-off, and Richard Bozorth suggests that the poem also gravely registers Auden's "sense of his own aging body", at age forty-one, in the face of "the worship of youth that permeates gay male subculture" (Bozorth 2001, 240). The "unruly sea" and "great gross braying group" of body worshippers are indeed comparable threats to one's autonomy (Auden 1976, 266). The island is a "Place of the skull, a place where the rose of/Self-punishment will grow." This pastoral image of Golgotha draws upon an unspoken sense of the dreadful and the hellish, gesturing implicitly to historical precedents where the beach body is coded as the site of possible annihilation, and "Pleasure Island" finds an analogue in Auden's 1933 masque play *The Dance of Death*, a cautionary satire that is also set on the beach. In the opening scene, the play's Chorus worship the mysterious figure of the Dancer, a sinister cult leader and advocate of bodily health who they claim can "give you a grecian figure", instructing new recruits to "Lie down on the sand" and feel "the sun on your flesh" (Auden 1933, 9). The ominously benign imperatives of physical improvement in *The Dance of Death* contain shadows of the *Freikörperkultur*, the free-body naturist movement that had flourished in Germany since the nineteenth century but became increasingly intertwined with National Socialism in the years leading up to the Second World War. Auden's play thus suggests how easily a culture of the body which advocates freedom from societal and sartorial constraints can be co-opted into a body cult whose aims lead troublingly, by extension, to the sought-after *purity* of the body politic.

This texture of Auden's writing, the overlay of his respective experiences in Germany and America at different but proximate historical moments, touches at last upon that ubiquitous and troubling metaphor of body fascism. Mickey Weems writes that "*body fascists*", the "men who judge others solely on physical beauty", are one of the consummate "stereotypes" (Weems 2008, 1) of the Circuit, the hedonistic gay party culture that began to bloom in the late 70s, around the time Holleran's novel was published. In its drastic associations, the notion of body fascism seems a world away from the "healthy self-regard" that Bianchi identifies in the same culture. In a 2000 review of David Morgan's *The Beach*, a collection of male nudes shot on the beach at Fire Island, Holleran writes "whatever you think of this – whether you call it body fascism or absently leaf through a book like this while waiting for a friend to get off the

phone – such collections […] are basically eye candy" (Holleran 2000). Unlike his character's similarly phrased lament about "nourishment" for nothing but "the eye" written some years earlier, Holleran the critic seems unfazed by the potential for such norms to be simultaneously superficial and fascistic. Bodies, he continues, are "paraded at the beach to exercise power" and "advertise the details of one's need in a partner", a beach which "presents a constant tension between reality and image, invitation and exclusion", for the "paradox of the Pines" is like the "double message of these bodies: on the one hand, hot, on the other, oh so cold" (Holleran 2000). Whilst this is true, it is curious to witness such a relaxing of the viewpoint expressed by *Dancer from the Dance*, a novel in which the stakes of hotness and *froideur* seemed considerably higher. The puritanical melancholia of *Dancer* and "Pleasure Island" after all make good upon the metaphorical weight of body fascism,
less as a fanciful analogy than as a present menace of annihilation that seems immanent in the very atmosphere of the beach. As Auden has it, it is as if "our/ Lenient amusing shore/ Knows in fact about all the dyings" (Auden 1976, 266), playing upon dying's orgasmic and organic meanings and rendering the numerous *petits morts* of a Fire Island weekend in relation to spectres of historical "fact".

The problem with this rendering of fatalism as immanent is the inference that it is somehow pre-determined, the inevitable price of gay pleasure on the "lenient" shore. However much these literary works invest in or ironize such a conflation, a tragic trope of gay life, the example of something like "The Boys on the Beach", the infamous 1980 essay by Midge Decter from which this article, with some irony, borrows a title, demonstrates how readily available such a trope is to moralistic and homophobic rewriting. Decter bemoans the changes she has witnessed to "the homosexual community I used to know" from her summers spent at the Pines in the 1960s, the pre-Stonewall years during which the Pines was still a mix of gay and straight (Decter 1980). These gays "were characterized by nothing so much as a sweet, vain, pouting, girlish attention to the youth and the beauty of their bodies", a "worship of youth" that was particularly "inescapable to the eye" on the beach, a catwalk for the "tanning flesh" which was never "permitted to betray any of the ordinary signs of encroaching mortality" (Decter 1980). Although Decter believes such preening was primarily intended as a mockery of the straight men at the beach, for "homosexuality paints" such men with the colour of sheer entrapment", it was at least an improvement upon the community "nowadays" (Decter 1980), in 1980. These gays are newly politicised and increasingly "engaged in efforts at self-obliteration", animated by the "increasing longing to do away with themselves – if not in an actual physical sense then at least spiritually – a longing whose chief emblem, among others, is the leather bar" (Decter 1980). Another such "emblem" might be Decter's once-beloved

beach at the Pines, which is also shorthand for promiscuity, an arena that makes visible the community's penchant for physical perfection and self-destruction.

"The Boys on the Beach" seems wilfully naïve about the reasons gay men might display self-destructive tendencies, seldom going further than the suggestion that it is because of some latent hamartia, as opposed to the insidious effects of hate speech like its author's. In "Some Jews & The Gays", an inspired and incisive response to Decter, Gore Vidal suggests that her thesis can be defined thus: "since homosexualists choose to be the way they are out of idle hatefulness, it has been a mistake to allow them to come out of the closet to the extent that they have", leaving them "no choice but to face up to their essential hatefulness and abnormality and so be driven to kill themselves with promiscuity, drugs, S-M and suicide" (Vidal 1981). "Not even the authors of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*", he continues, referring to the 1903 text that provided the blueprint for fascistic anti-Semitism, "ever suggested that the Jews who were so hateful to them, were also hateful to themselves" (Vidal 1981). Decter is hardly, in her bigotry and circumspection, the most reliable narrator of this history, but it is fair to say that *Dancer from the Dance* seems situated between the older fixation upon youth and beauty, on the one hand, and the muscular, high-octane pursuits of the post-Stonewall 70s on the other. If Holleran's novel flirts with the notion of there being something potentially fascistic and in turn annihiliatory about the gay beach culture of this period, Decter turns any such notion of the fascistic upon its head by her own example, a "virtuoso of hate" (Decter 1980) who singles out that culture as perverse and other-worldly. And "thus", Vidal writes, do "pogroms begin" (Vidal 1981).

Although it is not mentioned by name, one can imagine that *Dancer from the Dance* might belong on Decter's list of "Gay Lib 'literature' [that] is now characterized by an earnestness and callowness and crudity that are the very last qualities one who knew them would have associated with homosexuals" (Decter 1980). The cultural fate of Holleran's novel is indeed curiously marked by its capacity to rub both gay and homophobic readers up the wrong way. Whilst its status as a classic of gay American literature is relatively secure, with a re-print forthcoming in 2019 to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Stonewall, this canonization has not been uncontroversial. Numerous critics over the years have identified problems with the novel's melancholic portrait of gay life (Raphael 1995), not to mention its political flippancies, recently summarised by Les Fabian Braithwaite thus: "Holleran's depiction of gay life is very specific – it's very white, it's very middle class, it's very melodramatic, and it's very depressing" (Braithwaite 2018). It remains to be seen how *Dancer* will fare in the eyes of a "2018 view" (and beyond) that is "steeped in a political and social correctness that ebbs and flows with the tides and presidents" (Braithwaite 2018). Yet to view this novel as merely *of its*

time is to historicize prematurely and exonerate the present, while ignoring the stubborn longevity of the novel's implications. Holleran writes in his review of Morgan's *The Beach* that what is "odd is that AIDS did not call into question the gym culture's values […] Gym culture has only expanded" (Holleran 2000), and works as recent as Matthew Lopez's 2018 play *The Inheritance* continue to frame Fire Island as a place where, one character states, "the last thing anyone comes […] to do is read"; they come to "dance", "drink" and "get fucked up" (Lopez 2018, 211). The same character, during a drug-fuelled orgy of "hot" (215) bodies in the next scene, expresses a familiar desire for ecstatic surrender: "This moment, this feeling. I want to live in this moment for the rest of my life" (215). Today, the persistence of body image issues, along with 'dangerous' sexual practices like chem-sex, all too easily feed the narrative of the gay community's death-drive. Yet this tragic mythos of hedonism, which has re-emerged haphazardly at different historical moments, is not solely the product of conservative propaganda. It can be found alive and well in the literary tradition of writing about Fire Island, and *Dancer from the Dance*, for better or worse, is an iconic example.

The beach itself then provides a fertile final analogy for this phenomenon. That the beach is a site of haunting is something of a littoral truism; a sense of the residual, symbolically taken up as the spectral, is endemic to its definition. As the threshold between land and sea, or here and elsewhere, the sediment or matter of the past arrives there – is beached – in hiding or in full view, depending on your vantage. Trafficking in bodies in states of leisure, disrepute or death, the beach is an ambivalent meeting point for the pleasures of recreation and the harsh geopolitical realities of travel and exile. "Spectrality", Carla Freccero writes, "is, in part, a mode of historicity", describing "the way the past or the future presses upon us with a kind of insistence or demand, a demand to which we must somehow respond" (Freccero 2006, 70). The beach, if not exactly the site where "thinking and responding ethically within history" takes place (70), is nonetheless a location which might in the first instance make the call of history sensible. Manifesting as a temporal "insistence or demand", this call goes beyond linearity, a trajectory whereby the past penetrates the present, and catalyses the impression made by the future too. The "lenient amusing shore" of Auden's poem "knows" about the already dead, the casualties of the global conflicts preceding it, but also foreshadows "dyings" yet to come (Auden 1976, 266). This uncanny intersection of historical motifs within the liminal space of the Fire Island beach troubles its dominant iconography as a gay paradise. These concerns can thus at last be traced back to the simple tableau of Frank Post before a mirror, where he yearns to be "the most voluptuous, beautiful man on the Island, the homosexual myth everyone adored", leaving us to wonder if that "homosexual myth" (Holleran 1990 [1978], 31) in fact refers to the man who will, in one way or another, die trying.

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