THE STATE AS THE INTRUDER: CULTURAL HEGEMONY AND SELF-REPRESSION IN *THE BOYS IN THE BAND*

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ABSTRACT

When white straight lawyer Alan enters the all-gay birthday party that his long-time acquaintance Michael organized at his place for his friend Harold, he steps into a place where homosexuality is allowed and protected and masculinity parodied. He discovers an heterotopia situated in the city of New York in the late 60's, out of its norms and far from the police raids against gay people. This article discusses the intrusion of Alan in Michael's home, in Mart Crowley's play *The Boys in the Band*, as an understanding of the dynamics of control and intimidation perpetuated by the State against gay men at that time. It considers the reactions of the gay members of the party, as consequence of the intrusion, under the critical lenses of Michel Foucault's biopolitical theory together with the concepts concerning hegemonic masculinity from Queer Studies literature.

Keywords: Queer Studies, Crowley, Cultural Hegemony, Gay Representation and Power Relations

INTRODUCTION

The Stonewall Riots were only few months away when Mart Crowley's *The Boys in the Band* was first produced on the New York stage by Richard Barr and Charles Woodward on the 14th of April 1968 at Theatre Four, Off-Broadway, after it was first performed in the January of the same year at the Playwrights' Unit. Only ten days had passed since the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., but the necessity of advancing human rights had already been fermenting throughout the decade in the United States. The deaths of the two political icons, Malcom X and John Fitzgerald Kennedy, were still resonating in the minds of a younger national conscience striving for a more inclusive society (Kaiser 1988, 18). The economic prosperity and safety of the 1960s allowed the younger generations to focus on the fight for civil rights (Kaiser 1988, 15). A new impulse toward visibility and (self-)acceptance started to catalyze the wills of minorities to push against marginalization and harassment. Racial minorities, women and homosexual men, likely the most neglected categories of the "land of the free," started to gain a voice inside the national debate through the intensification and development of the already

existing movement of the civil rights. Those were the years when the streets and the squares became the stage for public reclamation, as historically neglected bodies gathered in public spaces across the country (Kaiser 1988, 372). The events that led to Blood Sunday in Selma, 1965, and in general the energy conveyed by black anger, set the pace for the other minorities' – such as gay people and women - political claims (Kaiser 1988, 230).

This paper explores the representation made by Mart Crowley of the relation between the men as part of the gay community and the State, through the analysis of the bonds and the attitudes of the characters in *The Boys in the Band* (1968). In light of the historical context in which the play is set and produced, I will consider Alan's intrusion in the all-gay birthday party as a projection of the governmental actions to control and suppress homosexuality in the Sixties. Therefore, I intend to demonstrate that Alan, the straight character, will prompt gay men to expose themselves and their *consciousnesses*, by threatening the already fragile balance that defines their bonds. To develop my investigation, I will borrow the theoretical lenses offered by Michel Foucault as regards the issues of power and space, and the literature on male bonding and the hegemonic masculinity offered by Queer Studies scholars as Eve K. Sedgwick (1985, 1990, passim) or Robert Connell (1995, passim). The concepts of *hegemonic masculinity* and *male bonding* will be crucial for the development of my analysis, since I will exclusively take into consideration the relationship between the State, represented by a heterosexual man, and the rest of the characters of the play, a group of gay men.

In the first section of this paper, I will pinpoint the stages that led to the formation of an organized homophile movement from the '50s to the Stonewall riots (1969), paying specific attention to measures adopted by the government towards gay people and the reaction of the Mattachine Society. In the second section, I will analyze the opening pages of *The Boys in the Band,* where I will introduce the concept of double consciousness by W. E. B. Du Bois used to explore the characters' interior struggles. In the third part, I will focus on the central part of the play, when Alan eventually enters the *closet*. In this part, I will analyze the space where the action happens, regarding it as a *heterotopia* (Foucault 2011, passim) in contrast with values of domesticity and heteronormativity. I will then make use of Queer Studies literature to analyze how patriarchal masculinity deploys the dynamics of bonding to confirm heteronormative

power. In the fourth and concluding section, I will engage Foucault's theories on biopower and panopticism to demonstrate Alan's unrequited presence as a projection of the State. There, I will give specific importance to the construction of a visual field into a captivating space as strategy to confirm privilege and subjugate the other.

FROM '50s TO '60s: THE MATTACHINE SOCIETY AND THE NEED FOR MORE VOICES

The 28th of June 1969 represents the moment when an obstacle to the systematic homophobia that had forced LGBT people into shame and compulsory secrecy received some real political and social attention (D'Emilio 1983, 55).

The social status of gay people in the sixties was likely affected by the political and cultural environment of the two previous decades. Indeed, as John D'Emilio reports in his *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, "The matrix of religious beliefs, laws, medical theories, and popular attitudes that devalued and punished lesbians and homosexuals [in the '40s] remained intact [in the '50s]" (1983, 53). Government bodies and scientific perspectives provided heteronormative US society with damaging evaluations of homosexuality, referring to it as a condition akin to criminality and sexual depravity (1983, 66). Therefore, the Fifties were the years when "the danger posed by 'sexual perverts' became a staple of partisan rhetoric" (1983, 54). As reported by the *New York Times* in 1950, American politicians were some of the main spokespeople of the fight against the 'perverts."[1]

As D'Emilio always reports, "the homosexual menace continued as a theme of American political culture throughout the McCarthy era. [...] Homosexuality became an epidemic infecting the nation, actively spread by communists to sap the strength of the next generation" (1983, 55-56). This widespread attitude towards homosexuals laid the basis for a multitude of arrests and raids against them. As D'Emilio continues: "[s]ystematized oppression during the 1950s exerted contradictory influences on gays. In repeatedly condemning the phenomenon, antigay polemicists broke the silence that surrounded the topic of homosexuality." Nonetheless, "[t]he condemnations that did occur burdened homosexuals and lesbians with a corrosive self-image" (1983, 69-70).

[1] See "Perverts called Government peril," New York Times, April 19, 1950.

This kind of instruction provided by professionals to American citizens also threatened, and often harmed, the lives and the carriers of all of those homosexuals, most likely gay men, who worked as teachers or educators. There is indeed several literary evidence that developed and confirmed a narrative of "contagious homosexuality," or that of "potentially pedophile gay men." Cohen describes how "educational discourse echoed medical discourse. … Sociologist Willard Waller considered homosexuality to be contagious, asserting in *The Sociology of Teaching* (first published in 1932) that the homosexual was liable to develop 'an indelicate soppiness in his relations with his favorites'" (2008, 11-12). Therefore, the essay cited by Cohen provides the reader, likely to be a head teacher, or another superior, with the necessary information to identify and eventually fire – or decide not to hire – a supposedly gay teacher (2008, 12). This particular side of multifaced stigmatization will be relevant in my analysis, especially linked to one of the characters of the *The Boys in the Band*, Hank, who is a schoolteacher with another man as a lover.

The founding of the Mattachine Society in 1951, marks the beginning of gay and lesbian organized reaction in the US, introducing the concept of gay people as an oppressed minority and challenging the common image of the 'ill homosexual' (Cohen 14, 2008). Nevertheless, in addition to the external restrictions, the Society "struggled to find ways to develop in its members a strong group consciousness free of the negative attitudes that gay men and women typically internalized." The founder of the society, Harry Hay, introduced in the organization various concepts and mechanisms that he had learned in his past in the Communist Party. Indeed, as Michael Bronski also reports, "using Marxist cultural theory, Hay understood homosexuals to be a distinct and oppressed class of people able to combat ignorance with education and organize against the prejudice of the dominant culture" (2011, 264). One of the aims of the organization was to allow gay people to be able to create a "highly ethical homosexual culture" and "lead well-adjusted, wholesome, and socially productive lives."[2]

Nevertheless, ten years later, the Society and consequent homophile movement remained marginal without noteworthy improvement of the gay social condition (D'Emilio 1983, 140). The only way they found to cope with such a heteronormative

[2] Mattachine Society, "Missions and Purposes," April 1951.

audience, to create a sort of tolerance, was to bend to the majoritarian perspective. Thus, attempts were made by the movement to find a cure for homosexuality, or condemned the practice of cruising (D'Emilio 1983, 140-42).

This kind of tendency actually reflected the lives of homosexuals from that time. Indeed, the majority of them "… led a double life. They constantly moved between at least two worlds: a straight world in which they were assumed to be straight and a gay world in which they were known as gay" (Chauncey 1994, 518).

However, the Sixties and its countercultural movements hosted new voices and perspectives, and a multifaceted view of homosexuality gradually substituted for the silence that characterized the activism of the Mattachine Society. Instances of gay life multiplied in literature and media, so that an increasing number of people saw homosexuals as a community and no longer as alienated and disgusting people (D'Emilio 1983, 145-46). Moreover, law, psychiatry and social sciences, participated in the creation of a more open understanding of a reality that slowly started to grow out of the narrow parameters of the Fifties (D'Emilio 1983, 156-61). This shift of perspective drew attention to the violent daily treatment by the police of sexual "perverts," and the decriminalization of sodomy started gaining ground toward consensus (D'Emilio 1983, 163-64).

During the Sixties, new names and approaches entered the scene of the movement, next to the veterans of the Mattachine Society. Frank Kameny, a spokesman for these new ways of thinking, became president of the Society in 1961, and implemented a more radical and explicit strategy for the defense of gay people and the recognition for rights, following the example of the civil rights movement (Stein 2012, 66). Considering Kameny's *Message to the Members of the Mattachine Society of Washington from the President of the Society on the State of the Society* (1964), where he claimed that "We should have a clear, explicit, consistent viewpoint and we should not be timid in presenting it," he openly distances himself from the "genteel, debating society approach" of the previous Mattachine (Kameny 1964). Kameny deliberately decided to challenge the old straight-pleasing silence and, as he claimed during a speech in New York (1964), took "the stand that not only is homosexuality . . . not immoral, but that homosexual acts engaged in by consenting adults are moral, in a positive and real sense, and are right, good, and desirable, both for the individual participants and for the

society in which they live" (1964). Through these words, Kameny explicitly rejected the negative stereotypes used to label homosexuality by proposing a positive - but not accommodating - image of gay people, encouraging a healthy coexistence between the oppressed minority and the State. By doing so, he "… launched the first systematic challenge to the government's exclusion of gays and lesbians, attacking the Cold War era notion that gay men and lesbians posed a risk to national security (Bullough 2002, 209)."

This new kind of militancy caught on throughout the country and a new activist force lead by Kameny started to fight animatedly for the liberation of gay people, openly in contrast with the old path walked by their predecessors. On the one hand, the older members of the Society used to try to satisfy the "healing culture" provided by doctors and lawyers while being careful to show only the 'decent' face of homosexual reality. On the other hand, Kameny and the other new minds of the movement would distance themselves from professionals' opinions and intended to show every aspect of the lives of gay people. If the early fighters wanted the gays to adapt to society, the latter fought for the contrary, for a society that would get rid of the stereotypes of sickness and criminality to become inclusive (D'Emilio 1983, 177-83). Kameny's standpoint awakened the worries and the doubts of his predecessors. Indeed, considering the different cultural frame that characterized the lives of elders and youngsters, it may be reasonable to regard '50s members' reluctance to embrace the new attitude as the consequence of the traumas they experienced in the McCarthy era.

The homophile movement spread, and the number of organizations throughout the nation grew. Kameny was fully aware of the revolutionary wave that was sweeping the country and "with an eye on the black civil rights movement, [he] set about recasting homosexuality — traditionally considered a moral or a mental health problem — into a civil liberties issue" (Bullough 2002, 212). In fact, as Bronski reports, "Kameny's use of the phrase 'Gay Is Good' in a 1968 speech was clearly resonant of 'Black Is Beautiful'" (2011, 317). The younger generations – who constituted a noteworthy percentage of the members of the new homophile movement – could not be indifferent to the revolutionary wave that was flooding the country (D'Emilio 1983, 247). Actually, "along with the battle for civil rights, other changes were happening in America, most clearly seen in highly politicized youth counterculture. The teen culture of the 1950s had by the

early 1960s transformed itself into a new, vibrant national youth culture that was politically aware, responsive to social issues, and understanding of personal experience in a larger context" (Bronski 2011, 296). This revolutionary wave was what led to the final explosion in Stonewall, in late June 1969, by the hands and fists of gay, lesbians and transgender people, both white and black, as a result of the clash between an increasing involvement of the victims in battle for their own liberation, and a political attitude of repression and intimidation.

In the following paragraphs, I will analyze some of the issues arising from the historical struggle between gay individuals and the hegemony of heteronormativity in the US on the verge of the Stonewall Riots. Specifically, I will explore the psychological consequences of the intrusion of a heteronormative character in a safe space appositely created for gay people to behave freely and naturally. Such consequences, like the emerging of a double consciousness inside the gay identities or the phenomenon of self-repression in the presence of a straight man, are indeed necessarily connected to the historical background that the play *The Boys in The Band* is set in.

GAY IDENTITY AND DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS

In this section, I intend to explore the phenomenon of the "internalization of the La"' as a feature of the existence of many identities in the Sixties, through the notion of cultural hegemony. As conceptualized by Antonio Gramsci (Gramsci 1948-1951, passim), the State exerts its supremacy by imposing morals and knowledge through a consistent and subtle distribution, until said norms are completely absorbed by the oppressed groups. This condition of interiorization may lead to a double identity, to a double consciousness that relies on belonging both to the State and to the oppressed minority. DuBois describes it as it follows: "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings…" (2007, 8). Seeing the historical and cultural similarities in the second half of the 20th century between ethnic minorities and the LGBT community, I would draw a parallel between the two cases of oppression in order to analyze the literary products

and to investigate the internal contrasts that reside in the minds of the gay characters of the play I am analyzing.

A gay man who grew up between the Fifties and Sixties might have an akin doubleness, a split yet merged individuality, as an American and a "pervert." According to public opinion, to political thought, and to professional ideas, he could be identified as an invisible threat or as a traitor, since he was betraying his own country, corrupting his American flesh with his sickness. Gay adults, like the older members of the Mattachine, who lived through the McCarthy era were likely to internalize the terminology they were named after (criminals, perverts, threats, animals, etc.). Therefore, one might ask what kind of will animated their consciousness. As I would argue, symmetrically in relation to their eventual doubleness, some gay people – especially those who had firsthand experience of repression and the fear of losing their jobs – may have had two contrasting needs, that of complying with society and that of being fully accepted as a homosexual.

What the State did was deprive the homosexual community of any form of socialization. In consideration of the several measures taken by the State to control and limit homosexuals' behavior throughout the country, one may wonder if those were part of a strategy to alienate the gays, to prevent them from socializing. I refer to the Senate's purge of the gays out of the government, the police raids in cruising places, and the prohibition on serving alcoholic beverages to gay people (Carter 2004, 22). Hence, any social practice seemed to be thoroughly discouraged by the government itself, and the only viable option at their disposal to embrace – at least partially – their identity, was made illegal, forcing them into a clandestine state of being.

In such an electric historical moment Mart Crowley puts on stage a gay reunion set on the occasion of a birthday. It is a picture painted with tragicomic colors, which I consider representative of a portion of the gay individuals living in New York right before the Stonewall riots. On average, the characters are in their late twenties and early thirties, an age range that suggests they have become adults between the Fifties and the Sixties, crucial years in the movement for gay rights (Crowley 1968, 4). As regards the social background of the characters, the group is actually characterized by a certain diversity. Even though they all seem to have a general artistic literacy – some more than others – they have very different standards of living. Emory, Hank, and Larry seem to

be the wealthiest, or at least those with a decent lifestyle, thanks to their careers as an interior decorator, school teacher, and commercial artist. As for the others, very little information is given about their careers, except for some details that hint at uneven lives, like Donald, who lives out of New York scrubbing floors since he finished college, or like Michael, a failed screenplay writer who spends his life travelling and running up (and from) debts. Bernard, the only African-American man in the play is characterized by his very humble origins as well, as the son of a maid. As for the man of the hour, Harold, the only information that is given is his obsession for his appearance and his past as ice skater.

The Boys in the Band is entirely set in Michael's home, the birthday boy and a friend of Harold's. A succession of uncensored slang expressions, pop-cultural references, and exchanges of insults performed as a form of gay art, marks the rhythm of the play. The places, the idols, the struggles and the consequences of repression, they all seem to find a definite place in the dialogue between the characters, without any filter, showing them both in their individuality and as members of a community to be. However, among the events of the play, one of the factors that undoubtedly moves the action is the intrusion of a straight character.

Alan progressively and subtly enters the play. First, he appears in Michael's words at the beginning of the first act during the preparations for the party. While Michael and Donald are getting ready, Alan enters the scene via a telephone call that will vex the secure shelter that the house and the celebration were supposed to be. An actual intrusion starts to be envisioned and the potential presence of this straight normative gaze casts its shadow onto the stability built by Michael.

> … The TELEPHONE rings on an empty Stage. Momentarily, MICHAEL returns. … (A beat.) Alan? Alan! My God, I don't believe it. How are you? Where are you? In town! Great! When'd you get in? … No, I'm tied-up tonight. No, tonight's no good for me. — You mean, now? … Well, Alan, ole boy, it's a friend's birthday and I'm having a few people. — No, you wouldn't exactly call it a birthday party … I'm sorry I can't ask you to join us—but—well, kiddo, it just wouldn't work out. … It's just that—well, I'd hate to just see you for ten minutes and . . . Okay. Yeah. Same old address. Yeah. Bye. (1968, 14)

Michael takes the information of Alan's presence in New York and his visit with initial confusion. While explaining the reasons why they could not arrange a meeting that night he struggles to hide the nature of the party or the guests. The shift from the

previous conversations with Donald to the telephone call is abrupt. Just few seconds before, they were shamelessly impersonating Hollywood divas, talking freely about their being gay men and cracking gay jokes (Harris 1997). Now, Michael is forcing himself to give Alan a different image of his life and his friends, or at least he does his best to avoid any compromising detail. As part of Michael's past of repression, Alan brings with him the same underlying anxiety of being discovered. "MICHAEL. … Listen, asshole, what am I going to do? He's *straight*. … I mean he's rally vury proper. Auffully good family. … I mean his family looks down on people in the theatre—so whatta you think he'll feel about the freak show we've got booked for dinner?" (1968, 15)

While sharing his struggle with Donald, Michael's mood changes, together with his attitude towards the future guests. Indeed, the way he deals with homosexuality and male femininity is not humoristic anymore (queens, sissies, etc.) since the words he uses to describe the forthcoming party are sharp and anguished. In truth, these can be regarded as some emerging symptoms of the double consciousness identifiable in a number of the personalities depicted in the play. Suddenly, the lens through which Michael sees, seems to be *straightened*. Michael's eyes do not see a house that is the shelter of his existence, but he precisely describes the birthday party that he is about to throw and *in extenso* his life and nature – as a 'freak show.' The possibility that a straight longtime acquaintance may re-evaluate Michael's persona, labelling him as gay – or as a sexual pervert – triggers Michael's paranoia.

Donald bitterly remarks on this change and points out how suddenly Michael looks to be ashamed of his life and his friends (1968, 16). Despite Michael decidedly denying the validity of Donald's doubts, he continues recounting how he got acquainted with Alan, back when he still "didn't go around *announcing* that [he] was a faggot" (1968, 16), when they were students at the same college. The underlying shame of these words seems to demonstrate reluctance and fear.

Given the two opposite attitudes that Michael has toward his and others' gayness, I argue that he is a man whose doubleness generates an interior fight. He is indeed paranoid about his image inside the public sphere, an image that he inexplicably tries to create according to the standards of heteronormativity: "MICHAEL: I was super careful when I was in college and I still am whenever I see him. I don't know why, but I am"

(1968, 22). At the same time, though, he alternates this straight anxiety with moments of camp-flamboyant performance.

His character is the common thread that unites the gay world of a private all-gay party and the outer world, to which Alan belongs. I regard Michael as swaying between the desire for privilege and the need for self-expression, a reflection of the divided coeval homophile movement. Indeed, in the moment when everybody will be present at the party, I will place him on a sort of middle area in a spectrum that goes from the unapologetic femininity and extravagance embodied in Emory to Alan's "proper" sanctioned masculinity.

THE CLOSET AS HETEROTOPIA AND THE INSTRUSION OF THE STATE

If analyzed from a Foucauldian point of view, in *The Boys in the Band*, the issues of spatiality and visibility are prominent. Michael's flat is the safe place where a group of homosexual men can separate themselves from their everyday frustration. It is a home that denies the values of domesticity, a free zone outside society but still immersed in the streets of New York City. It can be regarded as a closet-like space, an unrestrained dimension isolated and protected that exists because it is needed (Sedgwick 1990, 68). What is supposed to happen there, at the birthday party, is a narrow parenthesis in the frustrating lives of some gay New Yorkers. I regard it as a ritualistic, sacred place of purge and removal where the free flow of those otherwise neglected aspects of gay culture, from activities (stereotypical or not) to the exchange of emotional traffic is allowed, if not encouraged (Harris 1997).

I identify Michael's home not as a fixed closet, but a one-night-only celebrative closet, as *another space*, different from a home and from a club, reflecting and denying both at the same time. It is also *another time*, a place that has a definite ceremonial duration. Heterotopias, as Foucault defines them and their functions, are places that are needed "a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live" (2011, 25). Heterotopias embed and embody necessary situations, which are sometimes transitional, like ritual places, and sometimes perpetual, like cemeteries (2011, 27). Thus, the relationship that connects heterotopias to those who inhabit them coincides with their aim: heterotopias are originated to carry out the needs of those

people who are denied the right to behave in certain ways inside society. Heterotopias work as mirrors, since they depict people and objects while denying their existence (2011, 25-30). Michael's home exists in New York but at the same time, as a heterotopia, it denies what New York used to stand for: a place where gay identities and behaviors were punished and suffocated by law.

The social values belonging to the physical places where heterotopias are built, are rejected and overturned by both the place and its inhabitants. In the piece, indeed, the immoral, indecently queer birthday party ejects – while ridiculing – the morals of the domestic space. The house is the social vehicle that conveys the quiet models of heteronormativity and gender expectations (Farrell 1999,102). The image of "home" that appears in the mind of the American citizens in the Sixties is bound to the semantic spheres of parenthood, productivity, futurity and – unavoidably – heterosexuality (Farrell 1999, 25). Consequently, privileges and hierarchies, which are unconsciously perceived as "natural" conditions, are erected and strengthened by said models, from which the set of expectations that are projected onto those who dwell inside such spaces also derive (Farrell 1999, 105-06). The householder in this case – Michael – has little to share with said values, as a gay, sterile, and an unsuccessful screenplay writer. Given this contrast between domesticity and homosexuality, Crowley's heterotopia is the negative picture of the ideal domestic space: the rejection of its values and models is at the same time a reflection – maybe a rethinking – of them. This heterotopia of compensation can offer a place where the purging of the guests is allowed and in which is protected (Foucault 2011, 30). Indeed, the moment the shelter is threatened by the intrusion of a character who is intrinsically in contrast with the nature of this *other* space, the heterotopia itself trembles.

In the first part of Act I, the feelings of the Boys are generally positive, except for the initial worries generated by Alan's phone call. Indeed, the dialogues are animated by frequent references to Hollywood divas while fierce punchlines close the sentences. The characters call one another with the feminine version of their names and the party livens up with punctual choreographies far from the codes of masculinity. The way these men relate and bond with each other is quite distant from the dynamics that were supposed to regulate male relations. The mutual competition for women or the attention to physical sturdiness are absent in the partiers' conversations, just like any

references – with a comparative aim – to their marriages or to their offspring (Connell 1995, 46). In other words, the pursuit of a place on the pyramid of hegemonic masculinity is avoided (Connell 1995, 76). Triviality, obscene sex references and willing demasculinization are the most visible aspects of their sociability.

Alan's uninvited arrival happens in one of the peaks of perceivable gayness and cultural sharing between the friends. In fact, they put on stage a shared reminiscence of the moves they used to show off while dancing in Fire Island (Trebay 2013; Weems 2008, 175).

> No one, it seems, has heard it [the buzzer] but HANK. He goes to the door, opens it wide to reveal ALAN. He is dressed in black-tie. The Dancers continue, turning and slapping their knees and heels and laughing with abandon as ALAN goes to Right end of coffee table. Suddenly, MICHAEL looks up, stops dead. HANK goes to the RECORD PLAYER, turns it off abruptly. (Crowley 1968, 32)

Michael experiences Alan's entrance as a sort of trauma (Bracken 2002, 46). What Alan interrupts with his intrusion is not just a mere friendly dance session, but a ritualistic moment of collective re-experiencing, assisted through music and dance moves, aimed at invoking a dimension of harmony and acceptance profoundly in contrast with the reality of '60s New York (Reed 1996, 521). The fracture that divides the moments of innocent and pure abandonment of the choreography and the seconds that follow Alan's presence is evident. His being there, witnessing the forbidden enjoyment of a group of gay men of which Michael, long-standing acquaintance, is part, may be interpreted as a break in the heterotopic safety of the apartment/closet. Considering the exclusivity that Foucault uses to define heterotopias, one may wonder what happens in cases of an intrusion of the heterotopic space.

> MICHAEL. I thought you said you weren't coming.
> …
> ALAN. I… well, I'm sorry…
> MICHAEL. (*Forced lightly.*) We were just acting - silly… Emory was just showing us this… silly dance. (Crowley 1968, 32)

Michael's emotional balance looks lost. The carefreeness characterizing his – and his friends' – state of mind vanishes to be substituted by shame and vulnerability. The sense of safety that the heterotopia was supposed to convey suffers from the contamination of heterosexuality. Prior to the appearance of the heterosexual visitor,

they all felt comfortable enough to act un-straight without the pressures deriving from a judging social gaze.

The enjoyment seems to give way to denial, since Michael immediately diminishes the performance that Alan was unrightfully witness to, degrading it to just a "silly dance," depriving it of every possible value. This moment of Michael's frailty can be seen as the moment when his double consciousness emerges and the contrast between his gay and his American identity sharpens. As regards Alan, he seems to act as if he has interrupted something not only clandestine, but obnoxious and immoral, showing a mixture of embarrassment and concealed disapproval.

The first moment of uneasy mutual acknowledgment is followed by some equally uneasy introductions to the rest of the members of the party.

> MICHAEL. This is Emory. (EMORY *curtsies and sits on steps between* BERNARD's *legs.* MICHAEL *glares at him.* ...) Everybody, this is Alan McCarthy. Counterclockwise, Alan: Larry, Emory, Bernard, Donald and Hank.
> (ALL *mumble "Hello," "Hi,"* ...)
> HANK. Nice to meet you.
> ALAN. Good to meet you. (*Shaking hands with* HANK.) (Crowley 1968, 32-33)

Considering Michael's change of attitude, he perceives his friends' behavior as a threat to his public safety. His reaction to Emory's feminine behavior in front of Alan may demonstrate how the very emotional bonds that were woven in a different, closeted context are made fragile by his anxiety of being unveiled as gay in the eyes of someone who is not gay. Michael indeed would rather put at stake his friendship with Emory than risk getting his image ruined by being associated with his femininity. He interrupts him, tries to hide him from the straight eyes, doing his best to please the heteronormative sensibility.

As for Alan's manners and behavior throughout the play, I regard them as expressions of an affinity toward those who comply with gender models. By doing so, and by being at the same time the only socially privileged character, he seems to project onto the stage an ordering of powers that evokes the rules of heteronormativity. Thus, when Alan decides to interact with Hank rather than Emory, he actually structures a system of respectability and dignity that may have influence on the behavior of the bystanders. The man he chooses to familiarize with is Hank, a straight-acting Math teacher wearing a wedding band.

HANK. Are you in the government?
ALAN. No. I'm a lawyer. What… what do you do?
HANK. I teach school.
ALAN. Oh. I would have taken you for an athlete of some sort. You look like you might play sports… of some sort.
HANK. Well, I'm no professional but I was on basketball team in college and I play quite a bit of tennis.
ALAN. I play tennis too.
HANK. Great game.
…
ALAN. What… do you teach?
HANK. Math. (Crowley 1968, 34)

Probably taking Hank for a straight man, Alan engages with him in a 'masculine' routine, that is to say, a conversation that takes place on the safe – decent – ground of sports and career (Kroeger 2003).[3] Indeed, acknowledging that Hank has healthy hobbies and a proper job, Alan feels comfortable in talking with him, without considering him dangerous or inappropriate company. This hetero-friendly perception that Alan shows towards Hank, makes it possible to articulate a precise behavior for the development of *male bonding*. In choosing Hank as a potential friend, Alan chooses ineluctably somebody to whom he considers himself akin, somebody who will not challenge the features of his masculine identity. What is being put onstage is the representation of male heterosexual social dynamics, in their task of serving the patriarchal goal, that is, to reproduce a universal masculinity, invisible to the critical gaze, but surveying and repressing subaltern forms of male identities (Wiegman 2002, 41-42). The bonding between the two supposedly similar masculinities goes on to involve a third party, the feminine one, presented as the wife:

ALAN. (*To* HANK.) You're married? … (*He points to* HANK's *wedding band.*)
… MICHAEL. Yes. Hank's married.
ALAN. You have any kids?
HANK. Yes. Two. A boy nine, and a girl seven.
… ALAN. (*To* HANK.) I have two kids too. Both girls.
HANK. Great.
… ALAN. Nine years. … You live in the city?
LARRY. Yes, we do. (LARRY *comes over to couch next to* HANK.)
ALAN. Oh.
HANK. I'm in the process of getting a divorce. Larry and I are – roommates.
(Crowley 1968, 35)

[3] Kindle Edition. Position 1401.

This passage displays the parallel conditions of a heterosexual man involved in the consolidation of hegemonic masculinity (to which he adheres) and that of a homosexual man dragged into those dynamics of bonding. To safeguard himself, Hank chooses to omit that information about his sexuality that would jeopardize the relationship and his social safety (Kroeger 2003).[4]

The inclusion of the topics of marriage and offspring is another important feature of male bonding. Indeed, as Sedgwick affirms in her interpretation of Rubin's thought on patriarchal heterosexuality, "it is the use of women as exchangeable, perhaps symbolic, property for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of men with men" (1990, 25-26). In fact, the exploitation of the female figure for the purpose of oiling the wheels of the patriarchal factory is a fundamental factor in a successful male bond (Sedgwick 1990, 25). Hence, the involvement of children and wives are, in the first place, elements of comparison in the process of masculine reinforcement, and secondly, they are confirming the image of an even masculinity connected to the ideas of possession and dominance of the woman – and also the children – considering her a commodity or as a trophy that enriches their male persona.

However, it may be relevant to take into account the opening question asked by Hank as a symptom of the underlying sense of discomfort and constant alert by which he is synecdochally affected. Asking "Are you in the government?" echoes an ever-hovering paranoia on the part of gay people in the 60s: the fear of being detected and then prosecuted for his sexual nature and activities. With that phrase, Alan is being explicitly identified as a projection of the majoritarian – state – forces, together with their executive approaches, through police raids and the invasion of private/secret gay spaces. This state of diffidence and agitation translates into a tendency to censor themselves and their own friends' behavior, exposing their emotional link and their sense of belonging to the gay cultural background (Kroeger 2003).[5] Hank's worries of being identified as gay by Alan are intensified by his job as schoolteacher. If on the one hand it was a respectable occupation, on the other hand the education sector had been a minefield for homosexuals over those years. Indeed, since homosexuality in the

[4] Kindle Edition. Position 1406-1407.
[5] Kindle Edition. Position 1397-1398.

education system was easily associated to a potential of contagion or even pedophilia, teachers were frequently scrutinized by their superiors with an ever-pending threat of unemployment.

Another case is that of Michael's attitude toward Emory, the flamboyant gay man whom he perceives as a potential danger, due to his undeniable and unapologetic femininity.

> EMORY. [referring to Hank's job as a Math teacher.] Kinda makes you want to rush out and buy a slide rule, doesn't it?
> MICHAEL. (*Pulling* EMORY *to his feet.*) Emory. I'm going to need some help with dinner and you're elected. … (*Glaring: phony smile.*) RIGHT THIS WAY, EMORY! (MICHAEL *pushes* EMORY *and* BERNARD *to kitchen. They exit and he follows. The muffled sound of* MICHAEL*'s voice can be heard.*) You son-of-a-bitch! (Crowley 1968, 34)

The harmony that kept Michael and Emory together only few pages before has been substituted by a toxic proclivity to limit those expressivities that stray too visibly from the codes of heteronormative decency. I regard Michael's repressive behavior as a survival instinct that he feels necessary to avoid the social punishment consequent to a potential *outing* at the hands of Emory, by being associated with him.

In the following paragraph, I will develop a further analysis of how the heterotopic space of the closet results in a dimension of domination and control that can relate to Bentham's Panopticon. Therefore, I will also investigate the role that the already mentioned dynamics of male bonding has in the construction of a hierarchical structure and how this practice affects and eventually deteriorates those who are forced to it – in this case, gay men forced to male bond with a heterosexual man through the behaviors and the topics demanded by heteronormativity.

PANOPTICISM AND THE CAPTIVE BOYS

A dimension that recalls the structure of Bentham's Panopticon is delineated through this shift of the power balances. The gaze, especially the privileged gaze, is of a crucial importance in the construction of a visual field that leads the characters to a strict self-control that will result in a dull repression of the self (Foucault 2014, 233). To analyze the dynamics and the identities inside Michael's home, it will be useful to borrow Foucault's theory of panopticism and biopolitics.

Biopolitics is a term through which Foucault describes those dynamics of power that aim at the total control of life through the body, conveyed through institutions like family, education, army, and public administration (2013, 298-302). The idea of authority is perceived differently, since the traditional singular source of power dissolves into indefiniteness and absence. The meaning of the term *power* itself changes in Foucault's theoretical approach. In *History of Sexuality* (1978) he describes power as something that cannot be acquired, destroyed, or shared, but something that is used and produced in infinite sites, through moving and shifting relations (2013, 196-98). In a reality where the exact sources of power cannot be detected everyone can control and be controlled at the same time (Foucault 2013, 199). The condition of exercising control over other people is assisted by the force of the gaze, the fundamental factor in the Panopticon's function. The project of Bentham's prison is indeed based on the relationship between onlooker and observed (Foucault 2014, 226). It is a building with a circular base on whose center stands a windowed tower looking inside the walls. Along the perimeter are the cells, lighted from outside but also with a window looking at the central tower. Every prisoner's shadow is projected on the tower making them constantly visible even if they are not directly observed, but most important, they can all be controlled by one person at the same time. In this condition of ever-visibility the inmates tend to observe the rules of the prison and to avoid riots, since they do not know whether and when they are under control, to safeguard themselves from punishment (Foucault 2014, 218-21).

Under an analytical lens provided by Foucauldian thought, the situation envisioned in *The Boys in the Band* after the arrival of Alan resembles the panoptical controller-controlled relationship. In said relationship, Alan embodies the role of the potential guard, strengthened by the doubtful perception that Michael and his friends have of him, of his being part of the government or not. Inside this inescapable visual field, the only way to hide – or survive – is to dissimulate one's own sexual orientation and to regulate others' behavior in front of the intruder.

This kind of approach to the expression of sexual orientation, by omitting uncomfortable details about it, or by censoring certain relational information, affects the same relationships that are concealed. It is the case of the loving relationship between Hank and Larry: Larry indeed intervenes in the conversation between Hank

and Alan in the moment when they are visibly bonding on the common ground of "marital lives," to claim his link to Hank after the subtle offence of being kept hidden. The aftermath of his intervention is, in the first place, Hank's lying openly about their being together as *roommates* instead of lovers, and in the second place, the weakening of their relationship, expressed through an increasing mutual jealousy (Crowley 1968, 38). The jealousy between Larry and Hank will better explained in the latter part of the play, since it will be shown how Larry is inclined to a sort of promiscuity, rejecting the monogamy that is sought by Hank. Larry's jealousy can be seen as both a feeling towards Hank as his lover, but also a feeling of a proud gay men towards another gay man who is acting straight, betraying him but also the homosexual cause.

However, if at the beginning Alan shows some interpersonal preferences based on how straight-pleasing are the aesthetics and the lives of the characters, after a few pages, during a face-to-face conversation with Michael, he explicitly voices his evaluations of Michael's friends.

> ALAN. [Referring to Hank] We have a lot in common. What's his roommate's name? … I like Donald too. The only one I didn't care too much for was – what's his name – Emory?
> MICHAEL. Yes. Emory.
> ALAN. (*Puts drink on Upstage table.*) I just can't stand that kind of talk. It just grates on me.
> MICHAEL. What kind of talk, Alan?
> ALAN. (*Crosses to* MICHAEL.) Oh, you know. His brand of humor, I guess. … He just seems like such a goddamn little pansy. … He's like a… a butterfly in heat! I mean there's no wonder he was trying to teach you all a dance. He *probably* wanted to dance *with* you! (Crowley 1968, 39-40)

Alan's attitude towards Emory – metonymy of the image of gay identity – are based on all of those stereotypes and assumptions that find their origins in the postwar period, with the consolidation of mainstream information and mass-culture. Emory fits the image of the gay man conveyed by Hollywood and theater, of the man who has lost his masculine nature by being infected by a troubling femininity (Russo 1987).

I find it interesting that the deliberate attack of a straight character to an openly – in words and acts – homosexual man happens on a stage. Theater itself can be regarded as "a place where gay men could safely congregate and where they could enact their desires for flamboyance and a certain stylishness" (Clum 1999). However, the stereotype

of the show queen is generated and perpetrated by the popular-culture representations of the gay men passionate about musicals (Clum, 1999). On the one hand, this image challenges the heteronormative sensibility, and on the other hand, it freezes the common idea of homosexuality, impeding it from evolving.

Alan's perception of Emory is framed in those conventional limits, and before he actually alludes to his sexual orientation, he defines him as a "pansy," using the term as an insult referring to his behavior instead of his actual homosexuality. He continues his attack by denouncing his inclination to dance as an attempt to sexually approach – or molest – other men.

The fact that this moment of discrimination happens in a conversation between a straight man and a gay man, whose homosexuality is still not acknowledged by the other, illustrates another case of attempted male bonding. In this case the third party that is involved in the dynamic is the homosexual man, through his humiliation. One of the pillars on which patriarchal male culture is raised is homophobia. It cements and privileges hegemonic masculinity as a political claim that sets the superiority of virile comportments and the heterosexual existence (Sedgwick 1985, 3-4).

The symbolic value of Alan's presence in *The Boys in the Band* as a projection of the State reaches its climax at the end of Act I.

> EMORY. … I have such problem with pronouns.
> ALAN. (*Quick, to* EMORY.) How many esses are there in the word pronoun?
> EMORY. How'd you like to kiss my ass – that's got two or more *essessss* in it!
> ALAN. How'd you like to blow me!
> EMORY. What's the matter with your *wife*, she's got lock-jaw?
> ALAN. (*Lashes out.*) Faggot, Fairy, pansy… (*Lunges at* EMORY, *grabs him, pulls him off stool to floor and attacks him fiercely.*) queer, cocksucker! I'll kill you, you goddamn little mincing, swish! You goddamn freak! FREAK! FREAK!
> (1968, 45)

The ending words shouted by Alan suggest a reference to the Hollywood motion picture *Freaks* (1932).[6] This possible intertextual connection would lead to another

[6] Freaks, by Tod Browning, recounts the story of Cleopatra, a trapeze artist in a carnival sideshow who works together with other "freaks." Cleopatra seduces and marries Hans, a midget who has just inherited a large fortune, with the plan to poison him with the help of her lover, Hercules. To fulfill her plan, she acts as a friendly woman together with all of the other carnival performers that she internally despises. Nonetheless, when Cleopatra is asked to drink from the same cup as the freaks, as a sign of belonging, she violently refuses, insulting them.

dimension inside the heterotopic space of Michael's house. What I previously defined as a closet-like space, such as a gay bar, is now also a freak-show circus – as anticipated by Michael himself at the beginning of the play (Crowley 1968, 15). Alan, like Cleopatra, is an outsider belonging to the normative world, introduced into the minoritarian reality of a group of gay men, who in their turn stand for the freaks. The consistency of the parallels between *Freaks* and *The Boys in the Band* relies on the relationship between the normative, that the State recognizes as dignified, and the abnormal, the nonhuman – or more precisely, the dehumanized (Thomas 1964, 59-61). The former, as a privileged entity, appears to influence both directly and indirectly the lives of the latter, controlling them to exploit them, as in the case of Cleopatra, or to limit them.

Alan's ruthless explosion of homophobia may hint at the recurring police raids that saturated the state of mind of the pre-Stonewall gay community. This event indeed would confirm his being a projection of the State whose aim is to seep inside the private spaces of the gays, to search their closets and to eventually straighten them.

Moreover, his presence fractures not only the relationships of the boys in the band, but also their *consciousnesses.* At the beginning, Michael, after envisioning Alan potentially being at the party, vacillates on his identity. As the plot goes on, the double consciousness that silently characterizes the psychological reality of the gay characters becomes increasingly clear and distinguishable, noticeable in the polarization of masculinities and the intensification of the partiers' discomfort. Hank plays the part, until cornered, of the straight man while Michael is torn between his need to not live undercover and his will to be straight in the eyes of Alan. Two polar opposites are the femininities of Harold and Emory, who are apparently careless of the straight gaze and seem to rely only on one consciousness, and Alan, the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity, the norm. Considering the particular struggles (self-repression, unasked male bonding) that Hank and Michael have to cope with during the play, those who find themselves in the abyss of doubleness, fighting between the two drives to emulate the Other and fulfill their Self, appear to engage in self-destructive processes. Hank would rather *pass* as straight than claim his homosexual love bonds, putting them at risk, and Michael mistreats his lifelong friends. Michael is torn between his desire to claim himself as gay and the desire to comply with societal expectations and eventually,

after Harold's harsh words, he schizophrenically collapses under the sense of guilt and fear.

> HAROLD. … You are a sad and pathetic man. You're a homosexual and you don't want to be. But there is nothing you can do to change it. … Always, Michael. Always. Until the day you die. …
> MICHAEL. (*In desperate panic.* … [he] *is now white with fear and tears are bursting from his eyes.*) … if we… if we could just… learn not to hate ourselves so much. (Crowley 1968, 99-102)

This is the moment when Michael's double consciousness emerges. Michael acknowledges it, and it becomes unbearable. He finally recognizes his being a gay man, to paraphrase Franz Fanon's words, who is sealed in his gayness, wants to be straight, who is sealed in his straightness, as a result of an internalized inferiority complex (1986, 11-13). Lastly, he faces the impossibility of being happy as a homosexual whose tendency is to comply with the rules of straight-privileging society.

Considering the historical context that motivated and backgrounded the play, it may also be possible to identify a sort of microcosm-macrocosm relation between the history of the American homophile movement and the characters of *The Boys in the Band*. Indeed, seeing behaviors, standpoints, and relationships, one may detect an affinity of some of the characters with the members – especially the founders – of the Mattachine Society. That would be the case for Michael and Hank, who faked their sexuality in the past, as when Michael passed for straight during college or when Hank got married, as a result of the exposure to the repressing environment of their early youth, from which norms and perspectives were eventually absorbed and internalized. As the first members of the Mattachine would accept the compromise to "act straight" in order to gain respectability and safety while safeguarding themselves and their public image, Michael and Hank prioritize their public life instead of their private. Other members, like Emory, Larry, and Harold himself, may be likened to the more transgressive and riotous spirit that exploded in the Stonewall events in 1969. These characters wear their gay clothes unapologetically, far from the standards of heteronormativity, embracing their identity, sometimes also provocatively. Emory with his extreme and flashing femininity takes Alan's punch, like the drags and the gays during the night of Stonewall, while Larry refuses the patriarchal model of monogamy,

and Harold humiliates Alan and Michael's tendency to adhere to heterosexual standards.

Mart Crowley's *The Boys in The Band* provides a picture of the effects of the heteronormative Law and homophobia legitimated and encouraged by the State. On the surface, these norms are transmitted through laws, like the Sodomy Laws, concretized through police raids upon gay and transgender people or imprisonment. However, at the very roots stand the concepts of morality, acceptability, and respectability, modeled on the patriarchal totem of the white, straight (and manly), middle-class man. The need for and desire of acceptance is a feature that also marks the characters of the play, fighting between their identity as non-normative gay men and the tendency to act straight in order to gain a certain level of social privilege and safety, as in the case of Hank and Michael. This pressure to comply with heteronormative standards thus may be translated as the outcome of a social minority living inside a biopolitical society, in this case the '50s and '60s US, that leads the individual to an interiorization of hegemonic thought.

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