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***THESIS TITLE: "Blow My Head Off, Darling": Depictions of
Masculinity by Gay Male Authors***

PROSPECTUS

This paper will analyze and discuss depictions of masculinity within five novels by four non-heterosexual American novelists written after World War II. I am particularly interested in charting the portrayal of male homosexuality and homoeroticism, the conflation of sex with violence, and the commodification of male sexuality. I have chosen these novels-- Gore Vidal's The City and the Pillar (1948) and Myra Breckinridge (1968), Andrew Holleran's Dancer from the Dance (1978), Bret Easton Ellis' The Rules of Attraction (1987) and Chuck Palahniuk's Fight Club (1996)-- for three reasons. To begin with, each have been regarded as major representations of the changing perspectives on masculinity and gender politics within the decade they were published. Furthermore, each of the novels use highly aggressive, stylized depictions of masculinity in which sexuality is either represented as violent or reduced to commodifiable transactions. Finally, each of the authors have shown an uneasiness with being known as a "gay male author"-- aside from Holleran, who has been consistent in publicly identifying as such. In researching texts that simultaneously reflect and critique masculine ideology, I intend to demonstrate how their authors' unique perspective-- as outsiders both to heterosexual culture and to the mainstream depictions of homosexual men as effeminate and submissive -- create recognizable themes and tropes within their writing. In turn, the examination of these frequently recurring themes and tropes may create greater awareness and understanding of how the intersection of homosexuality and ideologies of masculinity shape American culture as we know it.

As Gore Vidal was writing **The City and the Pillar**, one of his primary goals was to create a depiction of homosexuality in which men retained masculine qualities-- such as athleticism and demeanor-- despite same-sex attraction. Through this, the work subverts the common literary motif in which gay men are ostracized or killed for outward displays of femininity (Levin). While the protagonist, Jim, is praised and pastured by other men for his masculine qualities, his ultimate goal is to establish a monogamous relationship with Bob, his childhood sweetheart. His ideals for their relationship are largely modeled off of a traditionally heterosexual romantic coupling. When Bob becomes repulsed by Jim's sexual advances, Jim rapes him, which can be seen as Jim's attempt to assimilate Bob into the heterosexual gender roles of the dominant hunter and submissive prey. Vidal's primary innovation was bringing to wider cultural prominence the concept of the homosexual man as a masculine, self-conflicted and self-hating predator, rather than as effeminate prey for heterosexual society.

Due to Vidal's acclaim as the young author of two other well-received novels, the media gave critical attention to Vidal's work even as they disapproved of its homosexual content. These print reviews marked some of the first prominent treatments of gay culture within society at large, and forecasted the greater awareness that homosexuality would accrue over the following decades. In analyzing City, it is important to note how Vidal struggled to label his sexual identity in his public life, often opting instead to identify with "gay acts" and labeling himself as 'bisexual' despite his lack of sexual relationships with women (Teeman). The City and the Pillar is also notable in the way it exhibits the influence of Sigmund Freud's theory on gender-- in which it was theorized that homosexuality is a result of a nagging or overly doting mother and an absent or abusive father. While the work references Freud and other psychological concepts, the characters' are only loosely plotted upon Freud's theorems on sexuality and gender.

In my study, one of the concepts I will be tracing are violent metaphors for male sexuality, which in City include “primal violence” (p. 29), “hunting” (p. 85) and a “sacrifice to... [a] dangerous god” (p. 104). In regard to the concept of women’s ability to convert homosexual men to heterosexuality (which I will hereby refer to as “The Savior Woman” trope), attempts are largely non-successful to the great disappointment and anger of the homosexual male characters. The expectation of heterosexual romance inspires a hatred of women for many of the gay characters, who subsequently wrestle with violent impulses. Despite the misogyny of the gay characters, the character of Maria Verlaine represents a nuanced and intelligent character who accepts gay men without letting herself be objectified by them. City and the Pillar also introduces the concept of Trade, in which straight or bisexual men have sex with men for money. This practice feeds into the way that the homosexual characters place themselves onto a spectrum of masculinity in order to assure themselves that they are not as feminine or dysfunctional as other homosexual men.

Myra Breckinridge, which Vidal wrote twenty years after City and the Pillar, reflects fundamental changes in the author's philosophical stance on gender and sexuality, though it is still charged by violent impulses. As a reflection of the then-recent Sexual Revolution, the work seems to have been greatly influenced by the abundance of new perspectives on sexual mores and the release of radically feminist texts, and is more clearly satirical than City and the Pillar. One of the primary cultural shifts represented between City and Myra is the wider presence of media in Myra, likely due to the development of television. This influence creates a more complex depiction of the interplay between mass media and gender roles. Thus, in light of the changing mores and roles of gender relations, Myra sometimes refers to traditional gender roles in the past tense.

While Jim was fixated upon navigating his masculine sexual identity through the labels and stigmas of homosexuality, Myra is

a transsexual woman who had previously identified as Myron and established a new life as an acting school instructor. Greatly influenced by the standard gender binaries established in 1940's American Cinema, Myra's goals in becoming a woman are to 1) become a famous movie star and, more importantly, 2) to destroy masculinity by way of being a woman while anally raping a male specimen. Myra explores the interplay between gender and sexuality, as the protagonist shifts gender expression and ideology throughout the novel. Like Jim, she rapes the male she is sexually fixated on-- however, her approach is meant to destroy the notion of masculine dominance over women rather than to reinforce it. Myra's attempt to destroy masculinity fails on all levels when Rusty, the man she raped, becomes more violent to women in subsequent relationships before becoming gay; and when a car accident (heavily implied to be sabotage) sends Myra to a hospital in which she is denied hormones and conditioned into becoming a heterosexual man. Unlike many earlier depictions of queer characters in which a normative societal construct is corrupted, Vidal writes a radically queer protagonist who is sanitized, creating the ultimate effect of loss.

Myra expands upon Vidal's earlier depiction of homosexuality by exploring the potential source of power found in subverting traditional gender roles. When Myra identified as Myron, he found power in "tak[ing] from Woman her rightful pleasure" by using an unwilling man's penis for gay sex in order to exercise "power over both sexes." Perhaps the ultimate failure of Myra's approach to gender is that she wants to destroy masculinity through dominance, while disregarding how dominance has been too closely interwoven with masculinity throughout our culture to differentiate the two. Vidal also revisits the trope of "The Savior Woman" through the character of Mary-Ann, Rusty's wholesome girlfriend. Unlike Jim's failure to become heterosexual for the "savior woman" figure in City, Myra becomes more taken with Mary-Ann than with Rusty and their budding relationship incentivizes Myra's choice to sustain her male identity

after the accident. Finally, while the commodification of male sexuality is not as prevalent in Myra as it is in the other novels discussed, Rusty's perspective on trade is transformed when he goes from labeling his classmates that engage in trade as being "too lazy to get a job," to becoming a kept boy for a Hollywood agent after his rape.

Andrew Holleran's **Dancer from the Dance** was one of the most successful novels from a writing group of gay male authors, The Violet Quill. While Holleran unabashedly identifies as a gay male author, it is worth noting that Holleran's name is a pseudonym that he chose based upon fear of backlash against his family at Dancer's publication, which illustrates the degree to which being an openly gay public figure was still subversive in that time period (Canning). Set during the onset of AIDS in the gay community, the novel takes place in the gay party circuit of New York City in which men engaged in promiscuous sex and intense drug usage.

Dancer opens and closes with several letters of correspondence between two gay characters; one of whom is the author of the novel within the novel, the other having just moved to the country to escape gay life. Their conversation draws distinctions between wealthy homosexuals and "doomed queens," the latter group being those who carry homosexuality as their primary identity marking and die tragically as a result of it-- and the novelist confirms that this novel will be about a "doomed queen." Said queen, Malone, is an extraordinarily beautiful and masculine rent boy who gave up a successful career when he could not reconcile his work life with his homosexuality. Following an abusive but traditionally monogamous relationship with another man, Malone moves in with Sutherland, a speed-addicted "society" queen who becomes Malone's pimp despite Sutherland's feminine behavior and appearance. The title, which is taken from a William Butler Yeats poem, reflects the way that the novel within the novel jumps perspective from character to character or maintains a first-person plural from the perspective of

the entire party. Through this, the reader is actually unable to tell which “Dancer” the narrative is being seen by. Ultimately, a party in which Sutherland was supposed to sell Malone to a wealthy young heir results in Malone’s disappearance and Sutherland overdosing. The novel closes with the letter-writers discussing what it means to be a homosexual, and whether or not all homosexuals are doomed.

Dancer is distinct from the other novels in this study in that there is not a female main character-- and thus, the “savior woman” trope is not addressed. However, many of the characters, including the letter-writers, openly long to become heterosexual and describe their experiences as gay men with very violent metaphors; including poisonous sea corals (p. 35), cancer (p. 51), the sucking of souls (p. 85), ingrown toenails (p. 222) and crashing bumper cars (p. 228). Dancer also explores the commodification of male sexuality in depth through Malone and Sutherland’s relationship with prostitution. However, beyond the primary storyline there are many tangential references to houseboys and trade throughout, including a passage that describes houseboys being “replaced as casually as fuses” (p. 29).

The Rules of Attraction is one of the earlier novels in the career of Bret Easton Ellis, who would proceed to write the hyper-violent American Psycho based upon one of the characters introduced in Rules. Ellis, who came of age during the AIDS crisis, writes primarily about privileged, wealthy and apathetic characters of the Reagan era that grapple with a lack of personal identity or sense of purpose and a fear of meaningful human connection. Ellis struggled with labeling his sexual identity in the public eye and, much like Vidal, identified as bisexual for most of his career while distancing himself from other gay writers. Some of this anxiety can be seen as a reflection of cultural context, as the AIDS crisis under the Reagan administration had a dehumanizing and demeaning effect on cultural representations of homosexuality (Shilts). This reticence towards sexual labels is

reflected in Rules, in which the male primary characters identify as bisexual (despite lack of female relationships) or have commercialized homosexual transactions that they rarely acknowledge. The sexually ambivalent primary characters condescend towards their gay-identifying peers for being effeminate.

Rules is set at a wealthy liberal arts college in New England, and centers around three protagonists: Paul (who identifies as bisexual), Sean (who identifies as straight) and Lauren (who identifies as a heterosexual female). The majority of the novel covers Sean's affairs with Paul and Lauren, who had dated each other prior to the beginning of the narrative. Despite extended, detailed passages in which Paul discusses his affair with Sean, Sean's version of events excludes any references to a sexual relationship with Paul. This omission speaks to the conceit of the title, by which "attraction" seems to be separated from notions of love or romance, and the protagonists become unreliable narrators due to their unwillingness to disclose any identity labels that may impede them from successfully attracting others. Aside from its disregard for homosexuality, the narrative viewpoint is largely misogynistic in its language describing women, which can be attributed to toxic masculinity, and many passages describe romantic gestures as attempts to fulfill "something I had been told to do" (p. 281). Regardless of gender, the male characters often refer to their sexual interests in either a possessive or derogatory way, in which the linguistic feminization of other characters increases the social and erotic capital of the male speaker.

Lauren's affairs with both male characters (of dubious sexuality) invite parallels to the other Savior Women depicted in Vidal's work-- however, because all of the male characters so rarely acknowledge their homosexuality in their interactions with her, it becomes hard to determine the role Lauren plays in defining the men's sexual identities. The depiction of commercialized male sexuality common to the other novels in the

study remains evident within Rules, in which allegedly straight male characters apathetically trade sex for lodging (p. 26)

Chuck Palahniuk's **Fight Club** is an independent variable in that, while the author is a gay man and the novel depicts masculinity, the protagonist is not explicitly gay. My analysis aims to examine how the conversation surrounding masculinity and sexuality is filtered through Palahniuk's gay male identity. Like Ellis, Palahniuk also came of age during the AIDS crisis, and he didn't come out as a gay man until late in his career despite having a long-term partner (Murphy). Despite various allegations of homoeroticism within Fight Club, Palahniuk has been quoted in a 2010 interview as saying that the novel is not about homosexuality because "affection wasn't there" (Murphy). As such, my theory is that the novel is examining the loveless nature of a commodified, anarchic and violent gay culture in opposition to the purity of a largely heterosexual concept of romance. Fight Club depicts a man with violent dissociative identity disorder as the two halves of a masculinity-driven homoerotic friendship-- one personality being the man's own and one personality named Tyler Durden, who establishes a "fight club" in which men anonymously engage in shirtless, brutal fights. Much like the homosexual world depicted in Dancer, the patrons of the fight clubs become image obsessed and exclusionary. One possible way of viewing the relationship between two personalities of the same man is that it is a metaphor for its inverse: Homosexuality (or gay culture) is being portrayed as akin to a mental disorder, or a destabilized sense of identity in which the duality of the masculine ideal and the homosexual impulse fracture and corrupt the human spirit.

Just like the majority of the novels examined in the rest of the study, Fight Club features a "savior woman" named Marla Singer. The protagonist notes early on that he is only able to see Tyler when Marla is absent, and that Marla and Tyler are having an affair, which he is jealous of. The protagonist lays out that "[he] wants Tyler. Tyler wants Marla. Marla wants [him]" (p. 14), which

could signify that the protagonist is gay (in a way that equates homosexuality to self-obsession), Tyler is the embodiment of his violent desire for masculinity, and the masculine ideal is fixated on women like Marla on a sexual level. This metaphor is further supported by a passage in which the protagonist claims that “Tyler had occurred... [because] Tyler loved Marla... Tyler or some part of me had needed a way to be with Marla” (p. 198). The ending, in which the protagonist dies from a self-inflicted gunshot wound, recalls the doomed queen narrative represented within Dancer.

The scope of my research, even at this developmental phase, reflects a variety of gay male perspectives that exist outside of traditional cultural tropes-- in which gay men are depicted in a variety of different ways, and yet masculinity is portrayed as a violent, aggressive and lucrative enterprise for which the characters strive almost invariably. I hope that my study will be enlightening in examining my primary sources through the context of queer literature; especially with the novels of Ellis and Palahniuk, whose works are not often analyzed from a queer perspective due to their reluctance to accept labels. However, it is important in studying the works of future gay male authors to establish a lineage by which to chart the themes, concerns and cultural shifts within this specific population. Despite the individual authors’ misgivings, it is important to see how their collectively unique cultural perspective shines a light on gender and sexuality norms that we may take for granted.

My approach to the research is largely thematic; identifying thematic trends and textual evidence through close reading of my primary sources in order to speak to a larger understanding of the culture that produced the texts. My work will be shaped after the tradition of literary historians and theorists such as David Bergman and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in seeking to explore depictions of gender and sexuality. In addition to my primary texts, I will be using the work of other queer theorists, literary analyses and news articles contemporaneous with the novels in order to

understand cultural context. I'll also be using interviews with the authors in which they discuss masculinity or homosexuality, in hopes of understanding how each version of their personal narrative and perspective informed the way they wrote. Finally, in regard to the wider context of gay literature in America, I've consulted texts that engaged with the earlier histories of queer literature such as James Levin's The Gay Novel in America. This study, in particular, covers how earlier writers had depicted masculinity within homosexual characters and examines some of the same tropes that I will be researching.