

“Got AIDS Yet?": Two Latchkey Gays Reflect on Queer Death Drive

Ragan Fox

Auntie takes the stage in a sequined version of Freddy Krueger's razor-clad glove. Auntie is the Ghost of Faggots' Past, a feminine, older character who calls attention to and challenges the stereotypes associated with the generation of gay men immediately prior to my own, a generation ravaged by AIDS. The significance of Freddy Krueger's glove is not lost on me. Freddy Krueger is the murderous villain in Wes Craven's *Nightmare on Elm Street*. The character molested and killed children, died in a fire, and now haunts and murders teenagers in their sleep. *Nightmare on Elm Street* functions as an intergenerational allegory. Krueger targets children of the men and women who set him ablaze and killed him. One generation pays for the sins of their predecessors. Krueger is the embodiment of stereotypes foisted upon gay men for decades: he's a child molester, flamboyant, an ever-present danger to nuclear families, and a threat to the (re-) production of future generations.

Krueger's monstrosity as a metaphor for queerness emerges most forcefully in the franchise's second film, *A Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge*. The movie's gay subtext makes the film's male protagonist arguably the first gay scream queen. In the film, Freddy stalks a teenage boy named Jesse played by gay actor Mark Patton. Freddy comes to Jesse in a dream, seductively brushes a razor around his lips, and growls, "I need you, Jesse." The scene pops with sexual tension. Freddy spends the rest of the movie possessing Jesse in a werewolf-like fashion. Luis Peitzman claims that "Jesse's struggle over his sexual identity is directly aligned with Freddy's attempt to take over his body" (4). In one scene, Jesse makes out with his girlfriend but is forced to stop when he feels Krueger taking over his body. "He's inside me," Jesse shrieks, "and he wants to take me again." Jesse leaves his heterosexual partner and runs to his jocular best friend Grady. Jesse jumps on top of a sleeping Grady and places his hand over his mouth to muffle his scream. "There's something inside me," Jesse explains after he reveals he killed their gay, sadomasochistic gym teacher. "Something is trying to

Ragan Fox is a Professor of Communication Studies at California State University, Long Beach.

get inside my body," he continues. Grady replies, "Yeah, she's female and waiting for you in the cabana and you want to sleep with me." Krueger literally tears through Jesse's body and kills a heaving, shirtless Grady. An AIDS allegory works in conjunction with the sequel's gay metaphors. Jesse's young, soft, beautiful flesh tears open and gives way to Krueger's badly burned and scarred skin. The transformation eerily reminds me of how AIDS ravaged bodies of young gay men in the 1980s. Krueger's oozing burns resemble Kaposi sarcoma lesions characteristic of AIDS-opportunistic infections.

I open this essay with an homage to *Freddy's Revenge* because, like Dusty, popular culture helps me make sense of chaos. Halberstam uses the term "low theory" to describe how people use seemingly trivial television shows and movies to engage in knowledge production. Low theory "celebrates work that comes from silly, eccentric archives, or pop culture artifacts that may otherwise be labeled 'unserious'" (Fox, "Phags for Phelps" 4). Halberstam contends that low theory is "assembled from eccentric texts and examples that [refuse] to confirm the hierarchies of knowing that maintain the *high* in high theory" (258). My response to Dusty's *Dancing Lessons with Fred Astaire* is, in itself, a dance: a disco between generations; a waltz between life and death; and a tango between low (popular culture) and high (citation-driven) theory. Like Halberstam, "I want to look for low theory and counterknowledge in the realm of popular culture and in relation to queer lives, gender, and sexuality" (308-9).

My love of *Freddy's Revenge* haunts my reading of Dusty's Auntie, especially when he cruises a young gay man, calls him "Peter Pan," and jokes, "I can certainly wear *that* like a bracelet," as he mimes inserting a fist into an anus. Like Krueger possessing Jesse, Auntie hints at a potentially violent merger of flesh. Auntie's monologue is one of instruction. Sexual innuendo aside, he aims to teach younger gay men about the majesty of the prior generation. Auntie declares that she must deliver his message "before Madame Age gets you, and she will." Auntie's words resonate with me as I ponder the changing topography of my skin. Smoothness and elasticity slowly morph into bumps and crevices. I am currently 43, an odd age where one seriously begins to reflect on past foibles and ponder mortality. Like Jesse, aging/changing flesh is inside of me and wants to come to the surface. Resistance is futile.

Dusty and I are members of the same generation of gay men. We remember the apex of the AIDS pandemic but were slightly too young to be sexually active, let alone ravaged by the disease in the same manner as our generational predecessors. AIDS haunts our imaginary, or dreams. Dusty and I are among the first generation of gay men (late Generation X) to live out and proud as gay men in the wake of AIDS gutting gay Boomers and early Generation X. We are old enough to have lost friends to AIDS-opportunistic infections but young enough to have taken precautions when we became sexually active. Looking back, we feel the prick of survivor's guilt. Looking forward, we aim to educate younger gay

men, many of whom appear disconnected from their immediate history. We turn to solo performance, in part, to memorialize bodies that laid a fleshy foundation upon which our newly won rights were built.

Dusty opens his show with a classroom lecture that defines Fred Astaire's *Dancing Lessons* as "the act or process of offering intergenerational gay male mentorship." A video montage of younger Dusty immediately follows the somber talk. 20-year-old home movies backdrop his now-40-something body as he tiptoes across the stage. The multimedia moment enables the performer to dance with a younger version of himself. He narrates his earlier fascination with suicide. Most gay people in the audience are likely familiar with the statistic that gay youth are five times as likely to commit suicide than their heterosexual counterparts (CDC). Dusty later narrates a 1990 episode in which he swallowed a bottle of pills. He describes the moment as, "Freedom, calm." Dusty's confession of attempted suicide functions as an ironic counterpoint to the middle-aged man who stands on stage, pondering the extent to which youth is both finite and a gift. Once we hit middle-age, aren't we all dancing with (and against) our younger selves, shaking our heads at ageist misperceptions of the prior generation, cringing over the follies and foibles of our teens and twenties, mourning the loss of hunky pop stars we assumed would prove forever young, and rolling our eyes at youth we once assumed would be perpetual?

Dusty and I were born in the 1970s but are both children of the 1980s, a curious time to grow up gay. Generation X is also known as the latchkey generation, where "personal identity was in part shaped by the independence of being left alone after school" (Blakemore). Unlock the door, grab snacks, and watch hours and hours of TV. Televisions parent us and shape our understanding of the world and who we may become. Images of dying gay men populated TV screens in the 1980s. How can a child possibly identify with entropy, or the predictable pattern of a human body moving from organization to disorganization, from smooth flesh to lesions, from life to a death sentence? In the 1980s, kids in my neighborhood joked that "gay" was an acronym for, "Got AIDS yet?" Queer death drive was baked into our most basic comprehension of gay life. Gay life=gay death. Edelman points out that "the death drive names what the queer, in the order of the social, is called forth to figure: the negativity opposed to every form of social viability" (9).

I sought identification in more colorful places. Like Dusty, I was addicted to Crystal at an early age. Crystal Carrington, not Crystal Meth. Watching *Dynasty* as a kid, I, too, saw myself in Crystal and Alexis, not Steven, the openly gay character who quickly forgives his father for killing his lover. Like Dusty, I remember when MTV primarily played music videos. Like Dusty, I still feel venom pulse through my bloodstream when I recall Eddie Murphy's homophobic jokes in *Raw*. I vividly remember the first time I saw Madonna's "Like a Virgin" pose, the one Dusty strikes before the Ghost of Faggots' Present begins his

monologue. For latchkey gays, these pop culture references signify more than mere nostalgia. These moments helped many of us begin to theorize a world in which we had no future, a world in which our history had been erased. In phenomenological terms, the present moment constantly tangoes with two partners: the past and the future. Dusty explores his here-and-now dance with the past; his current perception of the world performs a cross and ocho with the doorman at Tracks and a colgada and volcada with the daddy at the bookstore, dance partners claimed by AIDS-opportunistic infections.

Dusty's dance resonates with me as I add new images to the queer theory lecture I deliver to undergraduates in my Rhetorical Theory class. Most of these students were born after 9/11. Many of my in-lecture references are lost on millennials. They have never heard of *Nine to Five*, Kerri Strug, or *You Can't Do That on Television*. Every couple of years, a collection of popular culture references must be updated to reflect an ever-changing (ever-forgetting) undergraduate comprehension. Jokes must be re-imagined. Lectures must be updated. Today, I add photographs to the queer theory Powerpoint. Squares on the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt carpet the National Mall (see Figure 1). Each segment of the quilt is a carefully constructed, highly personalized remembrance of a lost son, a beloved friend (see Figure 2). For years, my lecture has included statistical information, like how President Reagan waited seven years before he



Fig. 1: The AIDS Quilt on the National Lawn (Smithsonian)

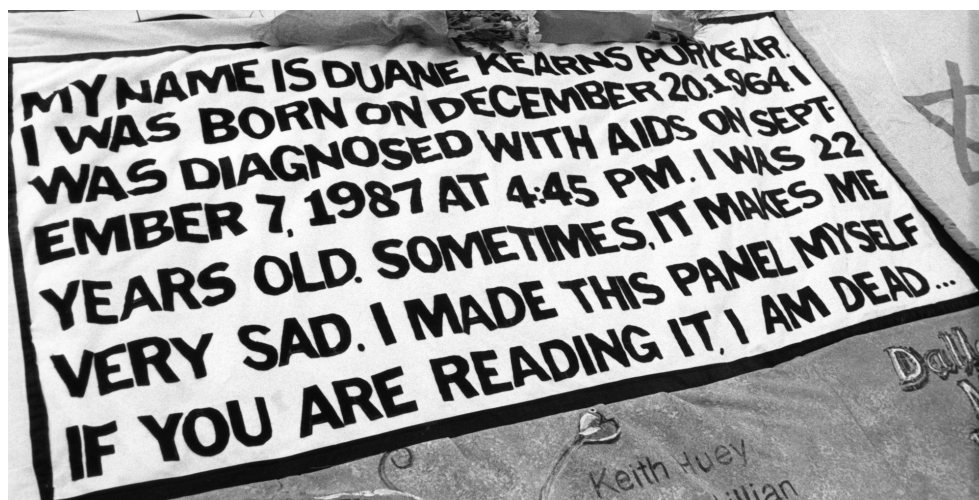


Fig. 2: “If you are reading it, I am dead” (Law 2)

uttered “AIDS” in a public speech. 41,027 people in the United States died before Reagan reluctantly acknowledged the pandemic; 71,176 other people had been diagnosed with AIDS in the country. Pictures of the quilt *texturize* and humanize those numbers, just as Dusty’s dance honors loss that is largely remembered through archive, ritual, art, and performance. Dusty may have survived the pandemic but HIV is forever enmeshed in his consciousness: anticipating contraction, breaking the news to loved ones, and taking a cocktail of pills. “We internalize that countdown. It’s in us,” Dusty explains.

Dusty’s account of Bob Bergeron’s death demonstrates that a death wish lurks inside even the most affable person. Bergeron was a handsome psychologist and author of a never-published self-help book titled *The Right Side of Forty: The Complete Guide to Happiness for Gay Men at Midlife and Beyond*. Dusty notes that friends describe the therapist as “relentlessly cheery” (Bernstein 1). *The New York Times* article about Bergeron points out that he was a geeky outcast when he was a teenager. Bergeron hit the gym in his late teens and transformed into a muscular “young man who looked like something out of a Herb Ritts photo shoot” (Bernstein 18). Before committing suicide at 49, Bergeron confessed to friends, “I peaked when I was 30 or 35. I was successful, everyone looked at me, and I felt cool in my sexuality” (Bernstein 34). Gyms do not reverse the aging process. No amount of curls or squats will restore youth’s luster. Bergeron’s ill-fated story in *The New York Times* emphasizes that the therapist appeared heartbroken when he realized his book had a limited audience (gay men over 40) and likely would not result in an Oprah appearance. Bergeron’s dread appears intimately connected to homonormative, capitalist ideals of success. The chiseled, White, and wide-smiling professional expressed breakdown-levels of anxiety when he anticipated

his book would be a failure. Bergeron's suicide makes it clear that, at the time of his death, he believed "the only right side of 40 was the side that came before it" (Bernstein 56). Dusty's narrative performance of Bergeron's death is, perhaps, the most beautiful moment in the production. The performer embeds the suicide in a larger story that queerly embraces a darkness that Bergeron fought to hide with feigned cheerfulness. Where Bergeron laments the upside of 40 as a "lie based on bad information" (Bernstein 54), Dusty leans into failure and turns entropy into art. Halberstam argues that "Failure presents an opportunity rather than a dead end; in true camp fashion, the queer artist works with rather than against failure and inhabits the darkness. Indeed, the darkness becomes a crucial part of a queer aesthetic" (96).

Freddy Krueger returns in the show's next monologue, when Dusty dons the monster's famous moss green and blood red sweater. *Elm Street* creator Wes Craven selected those hues as the movie's signature colors "after reading in *Scientific American* that the human eye has difficulty recognizing those particular shades of red and green side by side. Looking at [the color combination] is subliminally unsettling" (Hutchinson 4). Red and green, two generations of gay men placed side by side. In the Lavender Graduation monologue, Dusty assumes the role of a retiring professor, the Ghost of Faggots' Future. He wears a kimono and alien antennae, speaks in squeaks, and is mocked by young, gay students. This ghost is the apparitional incarnation of what Bergeron likely feared he would (or had) become. Writing about queer death drive, Lee Edelman also uses the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come to theorize queer futurity. He writes:

Scrooge's death, when revealed by the spirit of Christmas Yet to Come, far from rescuing Tiny Tim, assures his death as well. For the miser's grave serves to *realize* the negativity, the cruel enjoyment, the jouissance of the "neighborly love" to which his days on earth were devoted, expressing the triumph of the death drive and reifying the fatality he always embodied. Scrooge, as the child-refusing *sinthomosexual* whom the spirit of Christmas Yet to Come exposes as a life-denying black hole, must be understood as determining that there can be no future at all. (46)

Homonormativity leads many sexual minorities to believe that they can only "escape the charge of embracing and promoting a 'culture of death'" by performatively rendering a future built entirely from a heterosexual/reproductive logic (Edelman 47). Save Tiny Tim, no matter the cost, otherwise nobody will attend your certain and sad funeral! Edelman's *A Christmas Carol* allegory, performed by Dusty in *Fred Astaire's Dancing Lessons*, emerges salient every time I watch a television show or movie in which a queer character is sacrificed for the benefit of heterosexuality. Dusty and I saw the narrative play out in *Dynasty*. Blake Carrington kills his son Steven's gay lover. Later in the series, Steven marries two women and has a child—a boy named Danny, who will continue the Carrington name, keep inherited wealth in the family, and likely reproduce. I wish

Bergeron had spent more time pondering the soul-destroying mechanics of normative success. But then that would make me Scrooge, pondering how I might rewrite a tale of loss and turn Tiny Tim/Bergeron into the boy who did *not* die.

At the end of the first *Nightmare on Elm Street*, Nancy, the movie's heroine, finds Freddy on top of her mother—both figures ablaze. After sending her mother to hell, Freddy turns his attention to Nancy.

"Now, you die," he snarls.

Nancy turns her back to Freddy. She replies, "I know your secret now. This is just a dream. I want my mother and friends back. I take back every bit of energy I gave you. You're nothing. You're shit." Krueger disappears as he lunges toward Nancy. She wakes up from her dream and is greeted by her mother and friends. This is a broken promise of intergenerational survival. Her escape is quickly thwarted when Freddy traps Nancy and her pals in a red and green car that mechanizes the killer's persona. How fitting! Freddy, our scarred personification of death drive, literally drives the teens away from a previous generation who doomed them. But, oh, those glowing morning moments when Nancy earnestly believes in the fiction of her getaway. Wouldn't it be nice to wake up in a world where we could simply turn our backs to all that haunts us, where we could simply wish dead friends and parents back into existence? The doorman at Tracks materializes and greets us with a warm smile. The daddy at the bookstore winks and nods.

Dancing Lessons theatricalizes the sting of the haunt. Dusty explores intergenerational tensions in a way that urges us to confront a forever-enmeshed past, present, and future. Nancy is doomed because she turns away from the bogeyman. Dusty offers an alternate ending, one in which we see that the monster, or instrument of death, is buried inside us. "We internalize that countdown. It's in us," Dusty reminds his audience. The current cultural moment calls on Generation X gays to establish a more affirming sense of futurity for Millennials. Unlike our predecessors, we have not been forced into a sexual closet or wiped out by a plague. We are old enough to understand the implications of dead-end gay narratives in TV and film but young enough to engage in queer worldmaking that offers a new, affirming sense of queer futurity. Dusty's show is a beautiful example of how one might use performance to memorialize the past and have necessary conversations that will lay a foundation for a reimagined queer future.

Works Cited

- Bernstein, Jacob. "Not Waiting to Say Goodbye." *The New York Times*. Web. 30 March 12. < <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/01/fashion/the-life-and-death-of-the-therapist-bob-bergeron.html>>.

- Blakemore, Erin. "The Latchkey Generation: How Bad was It?" *JSTOR Daily*. Web. 9 Nov. 2015. <<https://daily.jstor.org/latchkey-generation-bad/>>.
- CDC. "Sexual Identity, Sex of Sexual Contacts, and Health-Risk Behaviors Among Suicide in Grades 9-12: Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance." Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004.
- Fox, Ragan. "Phags for Phelps': Exploring the Queer Potential of the Westboro Baptist Church." *Liminalities* 11 (2015): 1-19.
- Halberstam, Judith. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011.
- Law, Victoria. "The AIDS Quilt: A Photo Gallery." *Esquire*. Web. 1 Dec. 2016. <<https://www.esquire.com/lifestyle/g3077/aids-quilt-photo-gallery/>>
- Peitzman, Louis. "The Nightmare Behind the Gayest Horror Film Ever Made." *BuzzFeed News*. Web. 21 Feb. 2016. <<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/louispeitzman/the-nightmare-behind-the-gayest-horror-film-ever-made>>.
- Smithsonian Institution Archives, Acc. 11-009, Image No. 89-20205. Web. 26 Dec. 2019. <https://www.si.edu/es/object/siris_arc_394679>.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike International 4.0 License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>; or, (b) send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 2nd Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA