
Queer nostalgia in Andrew Holleran's *Dancer from the Dance*

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Résumé

Published in 1978, Andrew Holleran's disco-era *Dancer from the Dance* has been described as 'the first gay novel *everybody* read' while for subsequent generations, it has become one of the great testimonies of pre-AIDS New York evoking a sense of nostalgia perhaps even in readers too young to personally have experienced it. Yet the elegiac tone of the book, written from within and about 'the Golden Age of Promiscuity' itself, is, in fact, already nostalgic and its preoccupation with death, seen by some as an uncanny premonition of the looming AIDS crisis, is about a culture struggling to renew itself in the face of assimilation. Already in the letters that frame *Wild Swans*, the novel-within-the-novel that makes up most of *Dancer from the Dance*, the book presents itself as a historical document when a friend of the nameless narrator writes to him that: '*Your novel might serve a historical purpose – if only because the young queens nowadays are utterly indistinguishable from straight boys. The twenty-year-olds are completely calm about being gay, they do not consider themselves doomed*'. What is identified here right from the beginning is a process of assimilation – already described as a *fait accompli* among the younger generation – in which queers will become '*utterly indistinguishable*'. Queer nostalgia, as articulated in the novel, is about the fear that a more tolerant society – no matter how desirable in terms of equality and justice – as well as an economically restructured city will diminish or eradicate some of the most cherished aspects of our difference.

A peculiar aspect of novel, then, is that it depicts the creation of a new world – the 1970s gay ghetto, the discos, bathhouses, and cruising areas – while already mourning its inevitable disappearance. Set in the spaces of post-Fordist failure – empty lots and warehouses gradually turning into 'rent gaps' – *Dancer from the Dance* is a template or early articulation of a ruinous urban landscape aesthetic, which still dominates strands of queer club culture. If the iconography of this landscape has one overarching meaning, it is perhaps transience mirroring the provisional and contingent gay subjectivity of the post-Stonewall decade of increased visibility: while the broken city was beginning to be restored, the broken queer subject was rehabilitated through the interconnected process of gentrification. In this context, the elegiac tone of the novel is not merely about the protagonists growing older in a culture that values youth, but a realization that the culture it portrays will not be able to reproduce itself in a more tolerant society, nor indeed in a gentrifying city.

In this paper, I use Holleran's novel to rethink queer nostalgia not only as the yearnings for a specific period (although it clearly is that too), but as an ongoing process of mourning and resistance in the face of assimilation. Seen from this perspective, the ways in which the

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novel inflict *damage* on its readers (for example, as some have argued, by perpetuating a set of largely unobtainable beauty ideals), should not be understood as accidental, but rather as deliberate acts of social reproduction that *wound* and therefore ensure the survival of a *wounded* queer subject.

Mots-Clés: literature