1. Overview of the Work and Scope of the Paper

For those of the generation that cannot remember a time before Ronald Reagan was President and Michael Jackson was King, the AIDS epidemic has been a constant and unwelcomed companion, stalking its victims much in the way that polio stalked that generation’s parents and influenza stalked their grandparents. Horrible, yes, but no longer horribly mysterious- or at least no more mysterious than cancer, or heart disease; today, some thirty-five million people are living with HIV, and it has put twenty-five million people in their graves. It’s devastation is well-known and closely studied; it has dedicated professionals working towards its eradication, the cause around it gardeners celebrity endorsements, and it even has an easy to remember name. In the Western World, it is viewed as chronic as much as it is viewed as fatal. But there was a time when none of this was so, and in And The Band Played On, Randy Shilts effectively and chillingly brings to life the early years of the AIDS epidemic, when scores of people were dying in hurried and horrible fashion, and when no one knew why. The victims were, in those early days, mostly gay men, and though And The Band Played On artfully catches in its wide net all the major players of the epidemic, it is this community that is the mostly interesting when framed together with the debate surrounding Galileo, the Copernican system, and the Catholic Church. In a surprising number of ways the reactions and responses of gay community to the emerging reality of AIDS, from its leadership to its laity, mirrored the reactions and responses of the Catholic Church to the emerging realities of a universe in which the earth does not stand still, and where the sun does not pass in wipe ellipticals around it.

2. Background on the Bathhouse Culture and HIV/AIDS

The AIDS of the 1980’s was a death sentence. By 1982, patients with two years of diagnosable AIDS had a mortality rate of sixty percent; after three years it was eighty-five
percent.\(^1\) There was a palpable fear among doctors that, as time passed, the mortality rate would approach 100%. Given these numbers, and looking back on the actions and inactions during the early days of the epidemic with the gift of perfect hindsight, one can hardly keep from crying out in frustration at the way in which the gay community continued to rally around the institutions of casual sex\(^2\). Knowing, as we do now and as the world was slowly but surely learning then, that AIDS can be transmitted sexually, the consequences of the bathhouse culture are undeniable. No examination of the actions and attitudes of the gay community can begin in earnest before some information about the bathhouses, and the culture around them, is presented. The attitudes that created this culture are quite nuanced, and will be examined further, but it is sufficient to say that by 1980, the bathhouse industry in the United States was generating $275,000,000 in today’s dollars\(^3\) by serving a community where, according to one study conducted in Seattle, almost seventy percent of men found their sexual partners in the bathhouses\(^4\). The Club Baths, one of the many bathhouses in San Francisco, served three thousand customers a week.\(^5\) The typical bathhouse patron averaged 2.7 sexual encounters per visit\(^6\) with predictable effects on the community’s health: even before AIDS rose up to strike gay men down, Shilts notes, sexually-transmitted diseases were occurring in staggering numbers among the gay community. Two-thirds of gay men in San Francisco suffered from Hepatitis B; after living in the City five years, the statistical probability of getting Hepatitis B approached 100%.\(^7\) Parasitic diseases of the

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\(^1\) Shilts, 213
\(^2\) The role of other groups in the spread of this dread disease, such as the blood banks, is even more devastatingly frustrating and should not be understated nor overlooked, but is not the subject of this paper
\(^3\) Shilts, 19
\(^4\) Shilts, 19
\(^5\) Shilts, 89
\(^6\) Shilts, 19
\(^7\) Shilts, 18
intestinal tract became so prevalent that in San Francisco between 1973 and 1980, the rates of infection rose 8,000 percent.\(^8\)

Once HIV/AIDS entered into the mix, with its four-year incubation period where the carriers where virtually symptom-free, it spread savagely fast. By 1984, when the first workable blood-tests emerged and random blood screenings were conducted in San Francisco, 65% of “healthy” men tested positive for the virus.\(^9\) Of course, the science of AIDS had suggested long before 1984 that the disease was blood-born and transmitted through sex; many doctors and gay activists had been virtually shouting this from the rooftops since the first men began to die. And, almost uniformly, the community shouted angrily back. Suggestions that the bathhouses be closed, that condom use be encouraged or promiscuity discouraged, or that groups at risk for HIV/AIDS stop donating blood, are met with vitriol; the heterosexuals are called Nazi’s and fascists, while the homosexuals are written off as self-loathing, traitorous prudes the community press, and the community leadership actively pressured the medical community not to release information and case-studies that demonstrated the dangers of the disease or the extent of, and ways, it was spreading\(^10\) and, when reports were released, to use language that minimized the emphasis on sex.\(^11\) Much in the same way that Galileo and his colleagues were declared as heretics who needed silencing by a Church that trembled at the implications of his views, the voices in the community advocating change were attacked and silence, and for the same reasons: because the science was just untenable enough to allow for denial, and because the world and events swirling around them gave the community every reason to fear what change might mean.

3. **Science as an Evolving and Imprecise Process**

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\(^8\) Shilts, 19  
\(^9\) Shilts, 457  
\(^10\) Shilts, 193  
\(^11\) Shilts, 164
While modern observers, benefiting as they are with years of education and socialization in a world in which the suggestion that the sun revolves around the earth seems comically anachronistic, have no issue accepting Galileo’s views, the Copernicans of his time-period were in the incredibly frustrating position: they knew they were right, and by a wide preponderance of he evidence they appeared to be right, but in the face of those who demanded absolute proofs, they simply did not have the science to offer it. The early science of AIDS was much the same-and, just as the incomplete and generally theoretical science of the 17th Century gave those with a reason to deny it all the leeway they needed, so too did the incomplete science of the early 1980’s give blinders to those with a vested interest in averting their eyes.

Especially in the early years, that incompleteness was legion. Much of this comes from the fact that no one dies from AIDS in the sense that one might die of cancer or heart disease—the horror of AIDS is that it weakens one’s immune system so that one dies disease that no one is supposed to even acquire, let alone expire, from\(^\text{12}\). Indeed, when men began to die, the initial theories of the medical community did not point towards a disease at all, but rather to environmental toxins and recreational drug use\(^\text{13}\). Some doctors who rejected this position instead tended to view AIDS as not a disease into itself, but rather as new and aggressive forms of preexisting conditions that were preying on immune systems weakened by the other, more common sexually transmitted diseases that were common in the gay community—this attitude culminated in the original naming of the new phenomenon as GRID: Gay Related Immune Deficiency. These attitudes were swept away by new ones in the fast-moving world of HIV/AIDS medicine, and by April of 1982 most practitioners working closely with the disease

\(^{12}\) Indeed, among other factors slowing the medical progress against HIV/AIDS was the fact that many of the diseases killing patients were either incredibly rare diseases such as KS, or diseases previously seen only in animals, that left doctors with little frame of reference and no experience

\(^{13}\) Shilts, 96
were looking at the evidence and stating with confidence that they were dealing with a communicable agent.\textsuperscript{14} Of course, they still had no idea what that agent was, and while not so plentiful, there were still doctors and scientists who were either minimizing the evidence of transmission through the blood\textsuperscript{15}, or denying a disease existed at all\textsuperscript{16}. As the science progressed and the research improved, it became more and more obvious that HIV/AIDS was, indeed, a communicable disease, and that it was spreading through sexual contact. Less and less physicians were arguing otherwise—yet among the gay community, and especially among the leadership opinions were hardly shifting at all. Like the Church leadership of the 17\textsuperscript{th} Century, many were holding to whatever science they could to justify their positions, and purposefully covering their eyes to evidence that would tend to pierce it. Throughout the work, \textit{And The Band Played On}’s most compelling feature is Shilt’s struggle to come to terms with why this was.

\textbf{4. Strong Communities with Strong Fears}

Randy Shilts rightly attributes the swift spread of HIV/AIDS to, among other things, the culture of easily accessible anonymous sex that was prevalent throughout the gay community during the first years of the 1980’s, and he is strongly critical of those in the gay community, and its leaders, who so staunchly defended that culture and so savagely attacked anyone who tried to change it. It is easy for the modern reader to criticize that attitude in the same manner that the modern reader criticizes the Catholic Church for so firmly holding on to its dogma of an Earth-centered model of the Universe but, as \textit{And The Band Played On} makes clear, the gay community had both strong reasons to wish to maintain its culture of care-free sex, and to eye with suspicion anyone who tried to stamp it out.

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[\textsuperscript{14}] Shilts, 147
\item[\textsuperscript{15}] Dr. Joseph Bove, MD, is a notable example, and is among the very rare true villains of the tale mentioned earlier.
\item[\textsuperscript{16}] Shilts, 180
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By 1980, San Francisco had become one of the few places in the United States where gay men could live their lives however they wished to live them. Seeking that openness, gays from across the United States had come to Northern California in droves over the past few decades, and by 1980, five thousand gay men were moving to Northern California every year, and one in five San Franciscans were gay and in neighborhoods like Castro, they could be as open and demonstrative, or as private, as they wished. This was a remarkable level of freedom, even when compared to the very progressive New York City, where a successful and open gay man would still be considered reasonable in wishing to keep the word “gay” off of his letters, out of a concern that the postman might learn he was a homosexual. Such a concern would have been unthinkable in San Francisco’s Castro Street, where rainbow flags adorned the lampposts, where hundreds of thousands filled the streets every year in parades to assert their sexuality and express their solidarity, and where the Democratic Party dominated local politics—and Gay Democratic clubs dominated much of the Democratic Party. The power, and the omnipresence, of the gay community in San Francisco was undeniable, and to the modern reader, the emphasis on, and defense off, casual sex seems almost trivial compared to the gains the community was making elsewhere, in the same way that the modern reader observes the authority, wealth and martial prowess of the Catholic Church and cannot understand why so much weight was given to whether or not balls of flaming gas rotated around, or were rotated around by, hunks of rock. But much as the latter attitude betrays a lack of understanding as to the doctrines of infallibility that held the Church together, the former attitude demonstrates a tenuous grip on the events that created the Gay Rights movement.

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17 Shilts, 3
18 Shilts, 135
The Church of Galileo’s time believed itself to be under existential threat—and it was certainly not wrong. The Protestant Reformation, and King Henry VIII’s romantic tribulations, had pulled huge numbers of people out of Rome’s direct sphere of influence. Further, as more and more Nations got into the Colonial game and the fortunes of Spain and Portugal began and retreat, the Vicar of Christ saw his coffers bleeding out faster than they were before, and with the dawning of the Thirty Year’s War, it was easy for Catholic leaders of the time to believe that they sky was falling down around them. Four centuries later, this seems foolish: the Church, though changed and weakened, has survived, and the modern observer is left scratching his head as to why, amongst all these calamities, the Pope and his high officers chose to fight a battle over something so seemingly meaningless as astronomy. In *And The Band Played On*, Shilt’s answers that question by showing us why the gay community fought so hard for the lifestyle of anonymous sex and the bathhouses that represented them.

Why were so many so willing to cast aside the weight of science, and take hold of only those bits which they didn’t fear? The answer is nuanced, but at its core, the gay communities in San Francisco and in New York City felt that the bathhouses, and the culture that surrounded them, were proxies for their overall security and independence, which they viewed as tenuous at best, and extremely delicate at worst. It was only eleven years since the Stonewall Riots, and since then, the gay movement was quite wary at any action that might “turn back the clock” on 1969. As Shilts notes, sex (or, more artfully, the ability to have sex when one chose, without fear of police batons and paddy wagons) had become an affirmation of freedom and sovereignty which was not to be readily surrendered. For much of the community leadership, the pre-Stonewall era was a not-too-distant memory, and when activists (medical and non-medical, gay or straight) advised gay men to stop having sex for medical reasons, it sounded to many in the community no

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19 Shilts, 26/27
different than the scores of individuals who had been telling them, for so long, not to have sex for religious reasons. The freedoms they now enjoyed were hard-fought, and had hardened many in the community to view gay issues in broad themes of “us versus them”—of gays trying to live freely, and of straights trying to thwart that freedom. It was for these reasons that it was easy for leaders of the gay community, who for decades had dealt only with protecting that community from outside threats, to see the science of HIV/AIDS as simply another outside threat—and to grasp, instead, for the science that would give the straight world a reason to stay out of their affairs. When those who pushed the science of communicable transmission were called “sexual Nazi’s” and accused of next wanting to deport homosexuals to camps, this wasn’t simply rhetoric—these fears were quite real. And, in the context of the times, not at all unfounded.

Much like the Church stands strong four centuries after Galileo, the gay community has thrived since the epidemic of the 1980’s, and has attained a level of acceptance that even the most starry-eyed of Castro Street activists would hardly have seen as possible. It is easy, then, to dismiss the fears of their leadership as cynical at best, or paranoid at worst. But the safety of the gay community was much, much more tenuous then than it appeared with the gift of hindsight. The 1980’s were, of course, a time when the homosexual community was enjoying the most freedom it ever yet enjoyed; the 1980’s were also a time when Bill Kurtis could start a speech with an AIDS joke and New York theatre legend John Simon could remark that he couldn’t wait until AIDS killed off all the gays on Broadway and neither would suffer any serious backlash. Hate-crimes against gays were a regular occurance, and as the HIV/AIDS epidemic spread and appeared the threaten the heterosexual world, the heterosexual community moved swiftly from apathy to anger: calls for the segregation of AIDS victims were not uncommon, and

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20 Shilts, 384
21 Shilts, 556
when GOP operative Terry Dolan (himself a closeted homosexual) was asked whether the GOP supported tattooing those who carried the AIDS virus, he markedly refused to deny that they did. The gay community had other reasons to be frightened by the politics of the day. The GOP had featured San Francisco prominently in its 1980 advertising, using it as a foil to parry everything that Republicans were not. When that Party took the White House and the Senate that year, it brought with them Focus on the Family, Moral Majority, Jerry Falwell and Pat Buchanan, all of which were quick and eager to suggest that HIV/AIDS was merely the gay community reaping what it sowed. Even the supposed allies of the gay communities could not be trusted: in 1983, Mayor (and now Senator) Dianne Feinstein of San Francisco vetoed a City Ordinance that would have ended discriminatory practices towards gay city employees. Against this backdrop, it is frustratingly tragic, but certainly understanding, that many in the gay community felt under siege and, as a result, simply refused to embrace a scientific consensus that meant, to them, a potentially crucial blow to their independence and hard-won freedom.

Like the Catholic Church of Galileo’s time, the gay communities of the 1980’s enjoyed tremendous strength, but carried with them a deep and serious fear that this strength might be sapped in any moment. In both instances, this fear led them to deeply disappointing actions—but, in both cases, the fear should not simply be dismissed as mere hysterics, either.

5. Conclusion

It is important to note that neither the Church nor the gay community can or should be classified as villains in their respective tales. Indeed, as is often the case with history, these are not stories that can be told in terms of antagonists and protagonists. In *And The Band Played On*, Shilts artfully charts the path of AIDS and the major players who walked with it without giving way to too much demagoguery, and in doing so leaves a work in which there are few absolute

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22 Shilts, 473
villains. To be sure, there are a handful of characters whose actions are downright bone-chilling, such as Gaetan Dugas stalking the dim-lit bathhouses like Poe’s masked Red Death, but generally, one must be careful to remember that in this particular tale of lost boys, there are far more Mr. Smee’s than Captain Hook’s. Like the Catholic community during the scientific debates of 17th Century, the gay community acted out of a very strong fear of being set upon by forces outside their community—and, like the Church, they were quite correct in feeling that there were many all around them ready to pounce if they showed weakness. When the gay community acted in a fashion that hindsight judges as wrong, it did not do so out of malice, and in being wrong it was never alone. And The Band Played On illustrates the tragic results from a collision of imprecise science that was long on speculation and (for a time at least, short on facts) with a community that had every reason to guard its independence and the status quo, and to be fearful of those who wished to sacrifice either in the name of health.