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ABSTRACT

“Martyrdom and American Gay History: Secular Advocacy, Christian Ideas, and Gay Assimilation” is an analysis of gay martyr discourses from the 1970s through 2014. In particular, the dissertation examines the archives, narrative representations, memorials, and media depictions of Harvey Milk, Matthew Shepard, Tyler Clementi, and AIDS. The project’s primary focus is to investigate the role of religious rhetoric in facilitating American gay assimilation. Discourses of gay martyrdom reveal that secular gay advocates habitually employed Protestant Christian ideas in order to present gay Americans as similar to the dominant culture of straight Christians, a strategy that became increasingly prevalent by the end of the twentieth century after gays were blamed for spreading a national plague through sexual licentiousness. In turn, discourses of gay martyrdom expose the recurrence of Christian ideas in promoting, while concurrently foreclosing, the parameters of gay social inclusion. “Martyrdom and American Gay History” also questions the politics of martyrdom and analyzes why some deaths have been mourned as national tragedies. Milk, Shepard, and Clementi, the three most commonly-invoked gay martyrs, represent a narrow fraction of gay Americans that only includes white, middle-class, gay men. The dissertation demonstrates that discourses of gay martyrdom have promoted assimilation, not diverse sexual freedoms or capacious possibilities for queer lives. Ultimately, Protestant Christian dominance in the United States has been obfuscated whenever Christianity has been depicted primarily as an antigay monolith. Discourses of gay martyrdom reveal the role of Protestant Christian dominance in secular gay advocacy, and the ways in which Christian ideas have shaped and foreclosed possibilities for acceptable gay American citizens.
This dissertation is dedicated to my mom, who has always supported me, and to Kevin, who supported every step of the process.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>xii</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## CHAPTER

1. INTRODUCTION ........................................................................................................ 1
   - Thesis .................................................................................................................. 3
   - Explanation of Terms ......................................................................................... 5
   - Martyrdom ............................................................................................................. 6
   - The American Protestant Secular ...................................................................... 14
   - Methodology ........................................................................................................ 25
   - Gender, Race, and American Gay Martyrdom ...................................................... 28
   - Overview of Chapters ......................................................................................... 31

2. THE SAVIOR FIGURE: HARVEY MILK .................................................................. 36
   - Biographical Sketch of Harvey Milk .................................................................. 41
   - Historical Background and Setting .................................................................... 42
   - Jewish in Life, Christianized in Death ............................................................. 49
   - Christian Narration of Harvey Milk ................................................................... 63
   - The Gay M.L.K. ..................................................................................................... 75
   - The Martyred Man: Gender and the Solitary Savior Figure ................................. 79
Polyamorous in Life, Domesticated in Death: Depicting Milk’s Sexuality ..........84

Concluding Thoughts ..............................................................................................................96


AIDS and American Gay Communities ........................................................................104
1985 and the Rise of the AIDS Martyr ............................................................................117
Anger Activism: Stopping the Homosexuals’ Holocaust ..............................................126
Polite Mourning, (Fictional) Acceptance, and Gay AIDS Martyrs ..........................134
The Supersessionism of 1990s Gay Politics ....................................................................148
Concluding Thoughts ...........................................................................................................153

4. THE MODEL MARTYR: MATTHEW SHEPARD ..............................................156

Biographical Sketch of Matthew Shepard ......................................................................160
Historical Background and Setting .................................................................................163
A Gay Death that Mattered ............................................................................................169
The Making of a Martyr: Christian Ideas within Secular Gay Activism ....................186
The “Us” and “Them” of Martyrdom and American Religion ........................................192
Reading Religion in *The Laramie Project* .....................................................................205
Matthew Shepard’s Ongoing Legacy ...............................................................................220
The Spectacle of Martyrdom: Counter-Perspectives on Matthew Shepard .............229
Concluding Thoughts: Martyrdom as a Prescriptive Discourse .................................241

5. THE SACRIFICIAL SUICIDE: TYLER CLEMENTI ........................................246

Tyler Clementi Background ............................................................................................250
From Matthew Shepard to Tyler Clementi .......................................................................254
The Martyr as Representative of Many ............................................................................262
The Martyr as a Marker of Good and Evil ................................................................. 270
The Martyr as an Agent of Religious Conversion .................................................. 277
The Rush to Redemption ......................................................................................... 285
Concluding Thoughts .............................................................................................. 291

6. CONCLUSION ....................................................................................................... 294

BIBLIOGRAPHY ....................................................................................................... 300
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. &quot;Saint Harvey&quot; Exhibit</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. <em>Time</em> Magazine Cover, October 26, 1998</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Five months after Matthew Shepard was murdered in 1998, Vanity Fair published a fifteen-page exposé about the gay college student entitled, “The Crucifixion of Matthew Shepard.”¹ The article explored Shepard’s posthumous national prominence and the ways in which gay advocates had constructed Shepard as a martyr for gay rights. As the article’s title made clear, the author situated Shepard within an explicit Christian framework. Not only was Shepard’s murder configured as a “crucifixion,” the writer also described the location of his death as reminiscent of Golgotha, the place where Jesus was executed. Like writers for other mainstream publications, the Vanity Fair author reinscribed the image of Shepard as a gay committed Christian, a motif that gay advocates had promulgated since Shepard first became a household name. The exposé emphasized that Shepard had joined his university’s Episcopal student club, that he had been baptized and had served as an acolyte, and it included quotes from friends who made such declarations as, “If anyone lived the Christian ideal of turn the other cheek, it was Matt.”² Matthew Shepard’s prominent public image was, thus, constructed by gay advocates, and reiterated throughout mainstream media, in ways that presented him as a gay pious Protestant who suffered and died in ways parallel to Jesus, the prototypical Christian martyr.


The pervasive use of Christian concepts in relation to Matthew Shepard’s 1998 death was, in part, a response to the decades-long barrage of antigay rhetoric that positioned gays as antithetical to Christianity and, in turn, as unfit for full American citizenship. Gay advocates immediately presented Shepard as the model gay American: a young, practicing Protestant driven not by sexual lust but by Christ’s teachings. Matthew Shepard, the Protestant gay acolyte venerated by gays and straights alike, is, therefore, at the center of this study, the figure who most clearly exposes how Christian ideas have been used to promote gay social acceptance and assimilation in America.

“Martyrdom and American Gay History: Secular Advocacy, Christian Ideas, and Gay Assimilation” is an analysis of gay martyr discourses from the 1970s through 2014. The primary focus of the project is to examine how, where, and why religious concepts appear within discourses of gay martyrdom, and, in turn, to investigate how religious ideas have promoted gay assimilation. “Martyrdom and American Gay History” also questions the politics of martyrdom and asks why some deaths have been mourned as national tragedies. The project analyzes why particular people, like Matthew Shepard, have been upheld as martyrs, and it explores what invocations of martyrdom reveal about strategies for gay social acceptance related to race, gender, class, and religion.

The questions that animate this study are built on scholarship that examines American secularism as a product of Protestant Christianity, and scholarly literature that explores the role of religion in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer history. I am not investigating, as others have done, how gay religious communities or gay-friendly denominations, like the Metropolitan Community of Churches, have contributed to gay
activism and to lobbying for gay rights.\textsuperscript{3} That work is important for disrupting the false binary that presents religion as always inhospitable to gays and secular venues as the only places where gay lives flourish. Rather, following the lead of religion scholars Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, I am analyzing how certain forms of Christianity in America, often under secular guise, set the parameters for acceptable sexual citizens.\textsuperscript{4}

“Martyrdom and American Gay History” contributes to scholarly dialogue about secularism by investigating how religious, often Protestant, ideas have been used in the transition from gay liberationist to gay assimilationist politics. Specifically, this project analyzes how Christian concepts have shaped and enabled American gay social acceptance through discourses of martyrdom.

\textbf{Thesis}

The central argument in “Martyrdom and American Gay History” is that Protestant Christianity has been the primary vehicle for facilitating American gay assimilation. Discourses of gay martyrdom since the late 1970s reveal that secular gay advocates habitually employed Protestant Christian ideas in order to present gay Americans as similar to the dominant culture of straight Christians, a strategy that


became increasingly prevalent in the shadow of AIDS at the end of the twentieth century.

At times, gay advocates intentionally used Christian motifs as part of strategic efforts to achieve social acceptance. Other times, however, Christian concepts circulated within secular gay advocacy because of the ways in which unmarked Christian ideas commonly influence American thinking and values.

The ubiquity of Christian ideas within secular gay advocacy reveals, in part, how certain Christian theological concepts, like redemptive suffering, function as basic American cultural assumptions. Christian rhetoric of martyrdom and redemptive suffering achieved widespread appeal because it situates gay Americans within a Christian framework of unjust persecution and of the possibility for social transformation through the deaths of innocents who, aside from being gay, were constructed as similar to the American dominant class of white, college-educated, middle-class Protestants. Discourses of American gay martyrdom expose the recurrence of Christian ideas in promoting, while concurrently foreclosing, gay social inclusion. In turn, Protestant Christian dominance in the United States has been obfuscated whenever Christianity has been depicted primarily as an antigay monolith.

Discourses of gay martyrdom have not promoted diverse sexual freedoms or capacious possibilities for queer lives. Although martyrs are meant to stand in for the masses, those who have been upheld as gay martyrs since the 1970s reflect a narrow fraction of gay Americans that has only included white, middle-class, gay men. Gay martyr discourses underscore that acceptance of sexual diversity has been primarily, though not exclusively, reserved for those who adhere to the Protestant sexual ethos of confining sex to coupled, domesticated monogamy, and to those who are already part of
the white, middle-class, male mainstream. Discourses of gay martyrdom matter, therefore, because they reveal the role of Protestant Christian dominance in secular gay advocacy, and the ways in which Christian ideas have shaped and foreclosed possibilities for acceptable gay American citizens.

**Explanation of Terms**

Before I describe the analytical frameworks and methodology I used to examine discourses of gay martyrdom, I will first provide a brief explanation of select terms that appear throughout this project. The first is the term *gay*. I use the term gay in this study as a sexual identity moniker for people and organizations that use it for themselves. The murdered San Francisco politician, Harvey Milk, for instance, referred to himself as gay, and that is how I describe him in this project. I have tried to be attentive to when gay exclusively means gay men and when it includes lesbians. At times, the archival materials are not clear. Harvey Milk, for example, described himself as fighting for gay rights. But, as I highlight in chapter two, his version of gay rights did not always include lesbians. I have done my best to note such fault lines and to highlight when gay is used as a disingenuous umbrella term that primarily describes men.\(^5\)

Another term I use throughout this project is *religion*. I primarily use religion as a categorical descriptor for Protestant Christianity. Religion scholars Tomoko Masuzawa and Robert Baird have shown how the term religion is predicated on Protestant

\(^5\) My concern over terms that present unity when no such unity exists also explains my limited use of the word *queer*. Mostly, I use queer to refer to those who do not fit, or who refuse to comport to fit, within dominant society’s sexual and gender standards. Queer, however, also carries with it a politics of race. For an extended discussion of how the term queer commonly excludes people of color, see Cathy Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens,” *GLQ* 3, no. 4 (1997): 437-465.
Christianity as the model for what constitutes religion. The Protestant emphasis on individual belief and on containing worship to church or a sacred space became the ideal of normative religion. Religion, in this sense, was supposed to stand in contrast to other spheres of society such as politics, medicine, law, and art. When possible, I tend to employ more specific terms than religion, such as Episcopal, Mormon, or Protestant, a term I will elaborate on in a later section. When I use the term religion it mostly signals an introductory inquiry, as when I write that I am examining religion within secular discourses of gay martyrdom. The focus on religion within secular discourses of martyrdom provides a transition to the next terms I need to elaborate: martyrdom and the secular. Given that those terms are foci for this study, I am dedicating a section to explaining both and to clarifying how they are used analytically in this project.

Martyrdom

The second century Church father, Tertullian, wrote that, “The blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church,” meaning that martyrs are meant to inspire conversion. For Tertullian, Christianity grew because people were enamored by the ways in which

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7 Tisa Wenger, for example, has written that the Protestant construction of religion makes it difficult to use religion as an explanatory category when examining Native American traditions where quarantining separate spheres for the sacred makes little sense. See Tisa Wenger, *We Have a Religion: The 1920s Pueblo Indian Dance Controversy and American Religious Freedom* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

martyrs faced death. Martyrs, then, were postmortem proselytizers. They aroused intrigue through the spectacle of their deaths and through narrative re-telling of their suffering. The term martyr, as used by Tertullian and subsequent generations, came from a transliteration of the Greek word *martyrs*, meaning “witness,” as in a witness during a formal trial. Early Christians transformed the martyr from one who acts as a witness, to one who is witnessed, to one whose death provides testimony to the truth of Jesus as God. The martyr-as-witnessed referred not only to those killed publically in the Roman arena. Rather, a narrative culture of martyrdom developed. Christian martyr stories circulated widely, allowing communities and generations far removed to hear of the martyrs’ horrific suffering and, through a repeated narrative structure, their ultimate victory by entering a new, eternal life with Christ. That people were willing to die for the Church gave credence to the emerging community, and stories of their suffering acted as seeds, as substantiating rationale, for non-believers to consider Christianity.9

Martyr veneration was a central organizing feature of Christian life from Christianity’s inception. As scholar of ancient Christianity, Vasiliki Limberis, highlights, “It is no exaggeration to claim that all aspects of Christian life were best communicated,

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9 I should provide an important caveat: Christianity has never held a monopoly on martyrdom. While early Christians were likely the first to use the term martyr as I have been describing it, ancient Greeks, as one example, also had models of honorable self-sacrifice, such as Socrates who killed himself before he could be executed. Jews, too, have historically recounted stories of martyrs, like those who took their own lives at Masada rather than suffer death at the hands of the Romans. Islam also has a long history of honoring the martyr, or *shahid*, a person who defends the faith during times of trial and assault. Candida Moss provides an extensive elaboration on how Christians did not invent the idea of martyrdom. See Candida Moss, *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom* (New York: HarperOne, 2013), 24-41 and 58-61 especially.
understood—indeed lived—through the prism of martyr piety.” Other scholars of Christian martyrdom have noted that for the first several centuries of Christian history martyr stories were often as popular, if not more popular, than the books and epistles comprising the Christian scriptures. Indeed, the primary way that lay Christians participated in Christianity for hundreds of years was through celebrations and rituals that honored martyrs. While the attention given to martyrs shifted across times and places, martyrdom remained a prevalent and lasting feature of Christianity.

Protestant Christian leaders, although commonly antagonistic about venerating anyone other than Jesus or God, have exalted martyrs since the earliest years of the Protestant Reformation. During the English Reformation, for example, the British Protestant, John Foxe, wrote a book on Protestant martyrs, especially highlighting those killed under Queen Mary Tudor. For Foxe, the demonic villains who persecuted legitimate Christians were Roman Catholics, the heretics who had long corrupted Jesus’ original teachings. Historian Brad Gregory has illuminated how Protestants, Catholics, and Anabaptists all exalted martyrs in the century after the Reformation as their communities violently disagreed with one another. But Protestants, as opposed to Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians, never turned their martyrs into saints. As


Gregory explains, “Protestants repudiated the saints’ traditional intercessory role for the living and the dead. They rejected it as unbiblical and hence unjustified, a scandalous infringement on Christ’s uniqueness.” Thus, while Protestants continued to invoke martyrdom, they also insisted that prayers should only be directed to God or Jesus. Protestant martyr rhetoric has, moreover, persisted into modernity. For example, following the 1999 school shootings at Columbine High School in Colorado, evangelical Protestants habitually described one victim as a martyr. That young woman was believed to have proclaimed her belief in God before she was shot. Although her story, as with most martyr narratives, is now considered a fabrication, Protestant discourses of martyrdom have continued in America into the twenty-first century.

Discourses of American gay martyrdom are replete with Christian concepts and motifs. I have, therefore, turned to scholars of Christian martyrdom to provide a framework for analyzing gay martyrdom and its function in gay advocacy. I am not suggesting that gay martyrs are the same as Christian martyrs from earlier historic periods. Rather, I have attended to some common ways in which martyrdom functions in order to provide a framework for analyzing gay martyr discourses. Principally, I have focused on the following five features common to martyrdom: First, stories of martyrs primarily serve to instil ideas and values, not to narrate historical facts. Second, the ideas

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that martyr narratives inculcate are meant to instruct audiences on how to live and, in living properly, they prescribe ideas for how best to matter to a particular group. Third, by inculcating ideas about how to matter, discourses of martyrdom shore up boundaries of group identity, of how to be included within a specific community. Fourth, invocations of martyrdom throughout Christian history have been a primary mechanism for giving death meaning, for insisting that death can have a positive purpose. And fifth, martyr discourses are commonly framed through the Christian theological concept of redemptive suffering.

As part of the first function of martyrdom, I have analyzed narrative representations of gay martyrs not as historical facts, but as discursive fields for instilling particular principles and ideals. Scholars of Christian martyrdom largely agree that martyrdom is best understood as a mythical category, not as a historical one.\textsuperscript{16} To put this more starkly, most martyr stories are, to varying degrees, fabricated. Candida Moss, for example, has argued that all narratives of early Christian martyrs are legendary.\textsuperscript{17} Therefore, tales of martyrdom reveal more about martyrologists, those who compose martyr stories, and their political agendas than they do about the lives of the so-called martyrs. Scholar of Christian martyrdom, Gail Streete, writes that martyr narratives “are

\textsuperscript{16} “Mythical,” as scholars of religion have highlighted, is not exclusively a synonym for fictional. Rather, myths are stories groups tell about themselves that convey meanings from the past. As Elizabeth Castelli writes about using the term myth for martyrdom, “‘Myth’ in this context, refers to narratives that promote a coherent portrait of the past and that forge links with a community among its members and between the community and its claimed past.” See Castelli, \textit{Martyrdom and Memory}, 30.

\textsuperscript{17} See Moss, \textit{The Myth of Persecution}.
conscious constructions for the purposes not only of pious propaganda but also of community identity making.”  

In other words, martyr stories are fictional creations that are meant to convert attitudes about a purportedly persecuted group. One way that is achieved is by situating martyrs as innocent victims who, although enduring torture or death, are nevertheless victorious and emblematic of how one should live. Scholars of martyrdom also assert that martyr stories have been commonly invented to substantiate particular political and theological arguments. For example, when the trinity was debated as official Christian doctrine, stories were created of martyrs who died because of their belief in, and unflagging commitment to, the trinity.  

For reasons such as this, Stephanie Cobb insists that when analyzing martyrdom, one should ask, “What ‘ideological impulses’ did these stories satisfy?”  

Therefore, throughout this study I have analyzed the messages produced by narratives of gay martyrdom and the ideologies they have promoted or subverted.  

A second, and related, ubiquitous feature of martyrdom is that narratives of martyrdom commonly inculcate prescriptive ideas about how to live and, in turn, how best to matter to a select group. To further describe this point, Stephanie Cobb says that stories of martyrdom are “both descriptive and prescriptive: they explain who Christians are and how an individual can be identified as one; they establish behavior and establish

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19 For a discussion of how martyrs were used specifically for defending particular theological beliefs, see Limberis, *Architects of Piety*.

boundaries between Christianity and other social groups.” In other words, discourses of martyrdom reveal such things as who and what matters most within a community and why. To be invoked as a martyr is to be a model member of a group, an exemplar who others should want to emulate. In this way, martyrdom is “prescriptive” because ideas are inculcated about who and what is acceptable and ideal. Discourses of martyrdom, from this perspective, are not simply benign narrations of the past, but instructions for how to live, or how best to matter, in the present.

A third feature of martyrdom that has informed this study’s analytical framework is that narratives of martyrdom are meant to establish boundaries of group identity. Candida Moss writes that martyrs are used to forge “a rupture between ‘us’ and ‘them.’” Martyrs, in other words, are commonly meant to mark a dividing line between those who resemble or support the martyr, and those who do not. The us/them martyrrial division is also one of good and evil, of innocent victims and villainous persecutors. Therefore, throughout this study I frequently question who is included in the imagined “us” of gay martyrdom, and of how capacious or narrow discourses of gay martyrdom are for creating, or for constricting, boundaries of sexual and gender possibilities.

The fourth function of martyrdom that is central to this project is how invocations of martyrdom seek to give death meaning. Murder and martyrdom are not synonyms. Nor are murder and sacrifice. Employing language of martyrdom and sacrifice is a rhetorical attempt to imbue death with purpose. As scholar of early Christianity, Elizabeth Castelli,

21 Cobb, Dying to Be Men, 5.

explains, “In order for martyrdom to emerge, both the violence and its suffering must be infused with particular meanings... By turning the chaos and meaninglessness of violence into martyrdom, one reasserts the priority and superiority of an imagined or longed-for order.” A martyr’s death, in other words, is neither random nor senseless. To invoke martyrdom is to insist that a death has meaning and transformative potential. Giving death purpose, I argue throughout this project, is a specific Christian strategy based on Jesus’ death and expounded on through the purported deaths of the early Christian martyrs. In Christian theology, Jesus’ humiliating execution was a sacrificial death. *Because* he died, sins were atoned and humanity could be saved. His death was necessary for the possibility of social transformation. But, and importantly, Jesus was not defeated by death, nor did death conclude his story. His death was redeemed when, three days after he died, he resurrected and showed his followers the possibility of eternal life after enduring brutal suffering. Jesus, as God’s son, was the ultimate sacrificial death, rendering animal sacrifices that were common among ancient Israelites negligent. Early Christian martyrs emulated Jesus by becoming willing self-sacrificial deaths. Christian martyr stories, in turn, inverted tales of suffering and torture into messages of victory. As scholar of early Christianity, David Frankfurter, writes, “No such pity, of course, is invited in martyrlogies when pain itself (for martyr and vicariously, for audience) is invited as something positively joyous in its details and forms.” Suffering in martyr narratives, therefore, has a central, and meaningful, purpose.

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23 Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 34.

The fifth aspect of martyrdom that informs this project is that discourses of martyrdom are commonly shaped by the Christian theological concept of redemptive suffering. As Elizabeth Castelli summarizes, “Christians from the earliest generations onward found a compelling articulation of their circumstances in a narrative of persecution and redemptive suffering.”25 Christian martyr narratives convert pain and death into triumph and potential for a renewed world. In Christian theological terms this is known as *redemptive suffering*, a term I use throughout this project. The Christian concept means that suffering, or death when described as *redemptive sacrifice*, can have a positive purpose. And death, figured as a sacrifice, functions as a genesis, as a source for social improvement and transformation. Christian martyr narratives have been instrumental in articulating and spreading the idea of redemptive suffering. The pervasiveness of this specific Christian theological idea, and the ways in which this Christian concept gets deployed as a basic American cultural assumption, is central to what I interrogate in “Martyrdom and American Gay History.”

The American Protestant Secular

As an additional analytical framework, “Martyrdom and American Gay History” engages with and utilizes scholarship on the Protestant composition of American secularism. I have turned to scholarly work that examines both the American secular and the ways in which Protestant Christianity has remained dominant and shaping of social structures in the United States. Following the work of Talal Asad, an increasingly growing cadre of scholars have contributed to historicizing secularism and to

25 Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 35.
deconstructing the false religious-secular binary. In his text, *Formations of the Secular*, Asad argues that, “‘the secular’ should not be thought of as the space in which real human life gradually emancipates itself from the controlling power of ‘religion’ and thus achieves the latter’s relocation.” The secular is not simply the absence of religion. The idea that religion could be cordoned off, Asad argues, is a product of the West and the historical Christian construction of “the sacred” as a special domain. Thus, for Asad, the containment of religion to specific institutions in liberal nation states is an illusion. Religious ideas and practices pervade into various social spheres. But Asad also maintains that the secular is not a “mask for religion,” meaning that religion is not the impetus or purpose of every social institution or discourse, nor is the secular a synonym for religion. Therefore, when I use the term *secular* gay advocacy in this study, I am referring to people and organizations operating outside of avowed religious institutions; I

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28 Ibid., 35.

29 Ibid., 26.
am not suggesting that secular gay advocates are simply disguised or mindless agents of religious organizations.

My own thinking on the secular is most informed by Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini’s work. Jakobsen and Pellegrini have been especially attuned to how the secular in America is informed by Protestant Christianity. In their edited volume *Secularisms*, Jakobsen and Pellegrini historicize secularism as a product of the European Enlightenment where the secular was imagined as the province of rational thought, as opposed to the dogmatism of religion. This secularism, they insist, was always tied to Protestant Christianity’s definition of religion, its emphasis on cultivating individual, disciplined faith, and on relegating worship primarily to church. But Protestant Christianity was never predicated on diminishing Christian influence in the world or in people’s lives. As Max Weber writes:

> [T]he Reformation meant not the elimination of the Church’s control over everyday life, but rather the substitution of a new form of control for a previous one. It meant the repudiation of a control which was very lax…in favour of a regulation of the whole conduct, penetrating to all departments of private and public life.

The ability to extend influence into “all departments of private and public life,” as Jakobsen and Pellegrini highlight, entailed a reformulation of how Christian ideas were

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30 See Jakobsen and Pellegrini, *Love the Sin*. See also, Jakobsen and Pellegrini, eds., *Secularisms*.

31 Jakobsen and Pellegrini make clear that the ways in which secularism has developed in the United States, where it is imbricated with Protestant Christianity, differs from how secularism has developed in other locations such as India and Turkey. See Jakobsen and Pellegrini, introduction to *Secularisms*, eds. Jakobsen and Pellegrini, 12.

presented, policed, and normalized. Or, as Jakobsen and Pellegrini proffer,
“secularization has not so much meant the *retreat* of religion from the public sphere as its *reinvention.*”³³ Thus, as Robert Baird argues, discourses of “morality” proliferated, which became standards for living that largely entailed upholding Protestant values without naming them as such.³⁴ In turn, Protestant ideals were normalized and legalized in America even as the United States codified the separation of church and state.

The influence of Protestantism into ostensible secular spheres in the US has happened, and has been maintained, for a variety of reasons that scholars of American religious history have well noted. I, therefore, include within my analytical framework on secularism a body of scholarship on how Protestant Christianity has remained dominant in the United States despite growing religious diversity and a constitutional disestablishment of religion. Before continuing though, I should first concede that Protestant Christianity is not a monolith. American Protestants have created a dizzying array of denominations. In addition to theological disagreements, Protestants have also segregated, or forced segregation, because of race, the role of women, political involvement, and sexuality. Therefore, when I write about the Protestant influence on American secularism, I am generally referring to white, mainline versions of Protestant Christianity.

One reason why Protestantism has been especially significant in shaping American culture and institutions is because Protestant Christians totaled nearly ninety-

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³³ Jakobsen and Pellegrini, *Love the Sin*, 21, original emphasis.

five percent of the non-native population until after the Civil War.\textsuperscript{35} Political leaders, industry owners, teachers, publishers, university presidents, and almost everyone else was Protestant. Protestantism, although fragmented into multiple denominations, was celebrated as American. For example, throughout the 1760s and 1770s, residents in Boston and other New England cities annually celebrated Pope’s Day, a holiday where colonial residents “affirm[ed] their loyalty to the Protestant Reformation” and participated in the “gleeful burnings and hangings of effigies of the twin ‘evils’ (the pope and the devil).”\textsuperscript{36} For many colonial Protestants, and extending at least into the twentieth century, the Catholic Church represented hierarchical, anti-democratic values that were, consequently, portrayed as un-American.\textsuperscript{37} Protestant Christianity, conversely, was seen as promoting democracy by encouraging everyone to cultivate one’s own faith. Additionally, as several scholars have noted, the disestablishment of a state religion in the US seems to have created the conditions for Protestantism to become more, not less, prevalent. As Winnifred Sullivan highlights, many Protestant leaders worried that


America would fall into sinful disarray without a state religion.\textsuperscript{38} In turn, Protestant ministers and church volunteers actively promoted Protestant faith across multiple sectors of society. Not only did this lead to a culture where many Americans were involved in church communities, but also to the presence of a powerful Protestant lobby that promoted the legal codification of Protestant values at the state level. Examples have included the prohibition of mail service on Sundays and other “Sabbath laws,” Protestant Bible readings in public schools, tax-exempt status for churches, and federal funds for Protestant missionaries to convert Native Americans.

As an increasingly large influx of Catholic immigrants arrived to the United States around 1880 and later, Protestantism remained dominant, in large part, because Protestants united against the presumed threat of cultural upheaval from millions of Catholic immigrants. As William Hutchinson writes, “Protestant dominance continued not just in spite of diversification but also because of it. The arrival in the society of more or less unexpected groups was a burr under the saddle of a dominant Protestantism that previously had taken its dominance for granted.”\textsuperscript{39} Although Protestants had separated themselves into countless denominations, the mass arrival of Catholics and the sizeable number of Jews forged a Protestant union where internal divisions, such as those between Methodists and Lutherans, were of little relevance as they united to maintain a Protestant American culture. For reasons such as this, Catherine Albanese describes the religious

\textsuperscript{38} See Winnifred Sullivan, “The State,” in Goff and Harvey, eds., \textit{Themes in Religion and American Culture}, 227-260.

culture of America as “public Protestantism,”\(^\text{40}\) to emphasize that Protestant Christianity pervades far beyond church structures and into public spheres of government, education, the military, and elsewhere.

Another way Protestantism has remained dominant in the United States has been through the state establishing parameters of acceptable American citizenship. As scholars such as Tisa Wenger and Mark Rifkin have highlighted, the US government invested tremendous resources into “civilizing” Native Americans through Protestant Christian education.\(^\text{41}\) Wenger writes, “True religion cultivated ‘civilized’ standards of conduct and morality, understood in exclusively Anglo-Protestant terms, and made its adherents fit for American citizenship… Protestant leaders prescribed Christian missions as the most effective way to achieve the government’s civilizing goals.”\(^\text{42}\) According to this Protestant logic, Protestant Christianity represented the most evolved religious system. In its imbrication with secularism, Protestant Christianity was, theoretically, contained, limited to certain spheres, and exalted as prescribing the most proper, genteel conduct. In contrast, native and other religious traditions that were not exclusively relegated to a church, that included public displays of religion through dress, and that promoted different gender and sexual codes, were regularly regarded as primitive and barbaric. To


\(^{42}\) Wenger, *We Have a Religion*, 20.
be a civilized American was to be a white, gender and sexual-typical Protestant; everyone else needed to comport as closely as possible to Protestantism’s standards. As Tracy Fessenden asserts, non-Christians in the United States have been commonly “induced or compelled to assimilate themselves to Protestant norms in order to be recognized as legitimately American.” While this does not mean that Jews, Muslims, and others converted en masse to Christianity in order to become Americans, it does reveal that ideas about what constitute acceptable American citizens have been framed through Protestant parameters.

One way in which Protestantism maintains boundaries of acceptable citizenship is through what I term the Protestant sexual ethos. By “ethos” I am building off of religious historian William Hutchison’s use of the term when he writes about the American Protestant ethos, saying, “An ethos is not just a vague atmosphere; the term refers to the attitudes, habits, and beliefs that are dominant in a given culture, and that exercise some degree of power or influence in diverse communities within it.” As an ethos I am highlighting how Protestant sexual values have functioned as the normative American sexual standards. Protestant sexual values include limiting sex to married, heterosexual,

43 Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption*, 5.

44 In some ways this has meant that (religious) groups have had to present themselves in ways that look Protestant by, for example, emphasizing a sacred text since reading the Bible is of great importance to Protestants, emphasizing belief over practice or law, and creating decorous and structured worship services. For discussions of how various groups have tried to fit within Protestant standards see, for example, Levitt, “Revisiting Jewish Secularism in America,” in Jakobsen and Pellegrini, eds., *Secularisms*, 107-138. See also Riv-Ellen Prell, *Fighting to Become Americans: Assimilation and the Trouble Between Jewish Women and Jewish Men* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000).

monogamous coupling where sex is to be confined to the private sphere.\textsuperscript{46} Just as Protestant forms of worship have been exalted as more evolved than others, so have Protestant sexual values where married monogamy has been the expected ideal for everyone, including religious leaders.

As I explore in greater detail in chapter two, American religious groups that have promoted sexual norms that deviate from Protestantism’s standards, or what Marie Griffith terms “orthodox Protestant heterosexual monogamy,”\textsuperscript{47} have been regularly regarded as heretics, criminals, and as threats to the country. Even Christian groups that upheld celibacy were commonly ridiculed as sex deviants, corrupted Christians, and, in turn, as anti-American. The Shakers, for example, an eighteenth and nineteenth-century Christian group that mandated celibacy, were habitually accused of sexual depravity. Because adult Protestants were expected to get married, declarations of celibacy were met with Protestant accusations of hypocrisy. As scholar of religion in America, Amy DeRogatis, writes, “Shakers were attacked continually by outsiders and especially

\textsuperscript{46} Mainline Protestant Christianity, I should add, is not the only religious group to exalt married heterosexual sex as the sexual ideal and standard, especially in the present historical moment. Jews, for example, have mostly promoted a similar sexual value system, although historical differences (such as permitting polygamy) and contemporary differences (such as enforcing purity laws related to menstruation within Orthodox communities) expose variances. Nevertheless, Jews have not established the dominant sexual standards of the United States. Additionally, as other scholars have noted, gender roles within eastern European Jewish marriages and those of western European and American Protestant marriages differed. For a description of how American Jewish marital gender norms shifted to be in line with Protestant gender norms, see Riv-Ellen Prell, \textit{Fighting to Become Americans: Assimilation and the Trouble between Jewish Women and Jewish Men} (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000).

\textsuperscript{47} Marie Griffith, \textit{Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 51.
apostates who accused them of drunken debauchery, sexual licentiousness and heresy…Shakers were not just hated, they were demonized.” Moreover, one of the ways in which American Catholics have been derided from the earliest days of the nation has been through depictions of Catholic leaders as sex deviants. As with the Shakers, celibacy among Catholic priests was habitually presented as a fraud. Legitimate religious leaders, and acceptable Americans, according to Protestant logic, got married.

Religious groups that promoted sexual values outside of monogamy within marriage have also been ridiculed as incompatible with American citizenship. The Mormons, a new religious movement born in the nineteenth century that permitted plural marriage based on biblical models of polygamy and on belief in a divine revelation, were persecuted as threats to the stability of the United States. Rather than protect the religious liberties of Mormons, Congress passed the Morrill Act in 1862, which outlawed bigamy in all American territories. Polygamy persisted, however, in the predominantly Mormon territory of Utah. The federal government, in turn, refused to make Utah a state until Utah’s leaders agreed to repudiate polygamy and to criminalize known polygamists. As scholar of religion and law, Winnifred Sulivan, describes, “Under growing pressure to conform or be denied statehood, in 1890 the Mormon church issued a manifesto renouncing the practice of plural marriage.” Not only did the government codify

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48 Amy DeRogatis, “Gender,” in Goff and Harvey, eds., Themes in Religion and American Culture, 209.

49 For a discussion of how anti-Catholic bias in the US is connected to Protestant sexual values, see Griffith, Born Again Bodies, 25-31, especially.

50 Sullivan, “The State, in Goff and Harvey, eds., Themes in Religion and American Culture, 249.
polygamy as illegal, Mormons also had to disavow one of their sexual practices, one that had been upheld as divinely revealed, and comport to mainline Protestant standards in order to be regarded as American citizens.

By the late 1800s a forceful, and explicitly Protestant Christian, lobby contributed to the state’s investment in promoting the Protestant sexual ethos by regulating marriage, by enacting laws to prevent so-called “obscenity,” and to criminalizing prostitution.\textsuperscript{51} Scholars such as Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini have shown how the state has been committed to upholding Protestant sexual standards, even when not named as such, into the twenty-first century through laws and legal decisions.\textsuperscript{52} Rather than explicitly focus on legal issues though, the analysis I bring to this study will illustrate how discourses within secular gay advocacy have reproduced the Protestant sexual ethos as necessary for American citizenship. As Foucault illustrated in \textit{The History of Sexuality}, dominance is maintained not only through state apparatuses, but also through discourses that constrict sustainable and expansive choices by creating norms that appear natural and ideal.\textsuperscript{53} In many ways, “Martyrdom and American Gay History” is an analysis of how discourses of gay martyrdom have contributed to Protestant Christian dominance even when that dominance has been veiled or presented as oppositional to gay lives and rights.


\textsuperscript{52}See Jakobsen and Pellegrini, \textit{Love the Sin}.

Methodology

For this project’s focus I have chosen to analyze only those Americans who have been named by secular gay advocates as martyrs. In other words, I did not establish a set of criteria for what constitutes a martyr. Rather, I turned to gay and lesbian media archives and other cultural texts produced by gays and lesbians to establish the most prominent and commonly-invoked gay martyrs in American history. The three Americans who have been most described as gay martyrs are Harvey Milk (1930-1978), Matthew Shepard (1976-1998), and Tyler Clementi (1991-2010). Milk, Shepard, and Clementi are the focus of the project’s three main body chapters. I also decided to include an interlude chapter on the American AIDS epidemic. With one exception, martyr rhetoric was not used to describe gay deaths from AIDS during the epidemic’s first fifteen years. However, martyr rhetoric was habitually used during that same period to describe children and select heterosexuals with AIDS. I include the interlude chapter on AIDS to provide a historical transition between Harvey Milk and Matthew Shepard, and to examine why gay men, the group initially hardest hit by AIDS, were not generally included among the nation’s AIDS martyrs.

I have focused on a range of cultural texts in order to analyze how discourses of gay martyrdom have functioned in American history since the 1970s. The sources I analyzed for this project fall into several categories. First, I examined the digital archives

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54 I specify “secular gay advocates” here because some avowedly gay Christian groups have named their own gay martyrs that have not received as significant national attention. For example, see Kitteredge Cherry, “All Saints Day 2013: Queer and LGBT Saints and Martyrs Honored,” Jesusinlove.blogspot.com, last modified November 1, 2013, http://jesusinlove.blogspot.com/2013/11/all-saints-day-2013-queer-and-lgbt.html.
of gay and lesbian magazines and newspapers, especially those meant for national
audiences like *The Advocate*, as well as local gay and lesbian publications. I also
examined the digital archives of national mainstream newspapers like the *New York
Times* and the *Washington Post*. Other cultural texts I analyzed for this project included
plays, films, and books about those upheld as gay martyrs. When analyzing both gay and
mainstream news publications, I was not only interested in investigating discourses of
martyrdom. I also wanted to explore ideas that were concurrently circulating so I could
capture shifts and changing attitudes in American culture related to gays and lesbians
from the 1970s through the twenty-first century.

Throughout my exploration of diverse cultural texts I was continually driven by a
desire to understand the messages the texts produced, and to analyze the ideologies they
promoted or subverted. In other words, I did not attempt to write comprehensive
biographies of each gay martyr. Rather, I analyzed the already-existing narratives of the
martyrs in order to capture the ideas, explicit and tacit, that those narratives inculcated. In
the case of Harvey Milk, the only gay martyr to have produced his own substantial body
of writings, I read all of his speeches, newspaper columns, and the available transcribed
interviews. I analyzed Milk’s archival materials in order to compare them to how he was
posthumously constructed by those who have emblemized him. Throughout all of the
chapters I largely focus on what Marita Sturken terms the “popularization of history,” or
how “histories are told through popular culture, the media, public images, and public
memorials.”

My evidentiary base, therefore, tilts toward sources that had national

55 Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the
influence, which, while limiting my analysis of people and organizations not given
national voice, allowed me to interrogate the reasons why particular people, motifs, and
messages received substantial national attention.

My analysis of primary sources was informed by several bodies of scholarly
literature. As already discussed, I have drawn from scholarship that examines the
discursive function of martyrdom, scholarship examining the historical imbrication of
secularism with Protestantism, and scholarly literature that describes Protestant
dominance within American religious history. I also engaged with scholarship on gay and
lesbian history, which I highlight in each chapter in order to situate the martyrs within
their respective historical settings. I add to this history by focusing on the role of
Christianity in facilitating gay assimilation. Historian John D’Emilio has argued as
recently as 2014 that, “one of the gaping holes in the literature on U.S LGBT history [is]
religion.”56 I contribute to the ongoing historicizing of sexuality in America by
principally focusing on religion as a point of analysis.

The analysis I bring to this project has also been influenced by multiple scholars
working in queer and feminist studies. I have resisted employing one particular
theoretical approach or privileging the work of one theorist throughout the project. While

I occasionally draw from, for example, feminist theorists Judith Butler and Gayle Rubin, this project is not an attempt to prove, upend, or complicate their theories. Rather, I occasionally engage with scholarship in queer and gender theory in order to attend to some ways in which social hierarchies of sexuality and gender are maintained and regulated through discourses of gay martyrdom.57

Gender, Race, and American Gay Martyrdom

By selecting only those Americans who have been repeatedly invoked as gay martyrs for this project’s analysis, I have chosen a research inquiry that focuses on a group of white gay men. Discourses of gay martyrdom, as I reiterate throughout the ensuing chapters, reproduce the American racial and gender hierarchies. As the chapters illuminate, American gay martyrs have been narrowly constructed to represent those who, aside from being gay, would be at the top of the American social hierarchy as white, middle-class, college-educated men. Murdered lesbians, people of color, bisexuals, and transgender Americans have not been exalted as martyrs worthy of empathy, emulation, or adulation in any way commensurate to that of Milk, Shepard, or Clementi. Therefore,

57 My thinking on martyrdom and redemptive suffering has also been informed by some scholarship on Holocaust representation. In particular, Jewish scholars of the Holocaust have long critiqued redemptive readings of the Final Solution. As Liora Gubkin observes, “narratives or art about the Holocaust that imbue the Nazi genocide with some sort of meaning” have been sources of “strong critique” by Jewish scholars of the Holocaust. For such scholars, the Final Solution was a devastating historical epoch that nearly annihilated all European Jews, not the source of social renewal or positive transformation through death. While I generally avoid making connections between the Jewish Holocaust and the deaths of gay Americans, except for when I analyze the prevalence of that comparison during the AIDS epidemic, I have nevertheless been informed by this body of literature. See Liora Gubkin, You Shall Tell Your Children: Holocaust Memory in American Passover Ritual (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 63.
part of this project’s inquiry is to question the politics of martyrdom, to investigate why particular people get mourned as national tragedies. The politics of martyrdom, where a martyr is so often meant to convert attitudes through producing empathy from society’s dominant class, is entwined with politics of race and gender.

Gayle Rubin has written that, “Lesbians, suffering the dual disqualification of being gay and female, have been repeatedly dispossessed of their history.” I have come reluctantly to recognize that I am contributing to the erasure of lesbians in American history by engaging in this particular scholarly project. While I am unable to create a lesbian martyr, I address the absence of lesbian martyrdom in two ways. First, one section in the chapter on Harvey Milk is dedicated to Elaine Noble, the first gay American elected to a major political office in the United States, a qualifier normally ascribed to Milk. In the chapter I analyze why memory of Noble has been erased, and how narrative representations of Milk have contributed to that elision. Second, throughout the project I critique the exclusive focus in secular gay advocacy of making men into martyrs, and, in turn, I use gender as a point of analysis in the project.

Discourses of American gay martyrdom have been discourses of male gender normativity. Milk, Shepard, and Clementi have been constructed as gender typical, not as genderqueer or overly feminine, thereby reinscribing maleness and normative masculinity as ideal and dominant.

Along with lesbians, transgender Americans are also missing from these martyr discourses. One exception that I address in chapter four is Brandon Teena, a female-to-

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male transgender man who was murdered in 1993 after some acquaintances discovered his assigned birth sex was female. Although invoked as a martyr far less frequently than Milk, Shepard, or Clementi, Brandon Teena’s murder did garner national attention. But transgender issues were not the focus of American LGBT activism when Teena died in 1993. Nor did Teena’s murder produce anywhere near the level of outrage from mainstream media, secular gay advocates, or the general public that Matthew Shepard’s murder triggered five years later. I, therefore, highlight how part of Shepard’s widespread appeal was in how he was depicted as the average American boy-next-door, rendered gender typical and normal.

Related to Shepard as the average next-door kid is his whiteness. Throughout the ensuing chapters I recurrently return to how Milk, Shepard, and Clementi’s race played a significant factor in why they were emblematized as martyrs. J. Halberstam has written that in America, “some bodies are simply considered ‘expendable,’ both in mainstream and marginal communities, and the abbreviated life spans of black queers or poor drug users, say, does not inspire the same kind of metaphysical speculation on curtailed futures, intensified presents, or reformulated histories.”59 In other words, murders and assaults on people of color are so routinized that their early deaths are not always, or commonly, rendered as atrocities. Moreover, the prevalence of explicit and tacit racism in America has contributed to mainstream media and to secular gay advocates recycling images of presumably likable gay figures who are predominantly white. Discourses of gay martyrdom reinscribe racial hierarchies through the exaltation of particular people who

inculcate ideas about who matters most both within mainstream media and within American gay advocacy.

To put all of this more bluntly, as I have analyzed these discourses and crafted this project, I have been troubled by the homogeneity of American gay martyrs, of how the martyrs are narrowly constructed, and of how they represent a fraction, an already dominant fraction, of gay life in America. My investment in this project is not to reify Milk, Shepard, and Clementi as cultural ideals. Rather, “Martyrdom and American Gay History” should be read as a critique of these martyr discourses and their narrow parameters for acceptable American citizenship.

Overview of Chapters

The chapters in “Martyrdom and American Gay History” are organized chronologically so that I am able to attend to shifts in American cultural history from the 1970s through the twenty-first century. Chapter two addresses Harvey Milk, the San Francisco politician murdered in 1978. The chapter offers a comparison of Milk’s own writings, speeches, and interviews to how others depicted him in later representations. The chapter principally addresses two areas: the posthumous erasure of Milk’s Jewishness despite the formative role of Jewish culture on his political activism, and the erasure of Milk’s polyamorous sex life and his theories about maintaining multiple concurrent romantic relationships as an ideal way to build community. The chapter also attends to how, and why, Milk has been remembered as a savior figure for the gay movement, overshadowing the contributions of others like Elaine Noble, the first openly-gay American elected to a major public office. The chapter illustrates how Milk’s posthumous public image has been significantly shaped by Christian motifs. Primarily,
the chapter addresses the reasons why Harvey Milk transmogrified from a Jewish, liberationist, polyamorist in life to a Christianized, mainstream, monogamist in death.

Discourses of gay martyrdom were mostly absent during the period of the greatest mass gay death in US history: the American AIDS epidemic. Chapter three is, therefore, an interlude in my study of American gay martyrdom. Primarily, the chapter illustrates how AIDS impacted American gay communities during the epidemic’s first fifteen years. In order to provide a sense of the history and cultural climate in the years between Milk and Shepard’s deaths, I attend to the many ways in which gays, and especially gay men with AIDS, were reviled by those outside of gay communities. I also highlight the internal arguments that erupted within gay communities over the role of sexual freedom that some gay men believed led to mass death. The chapter especially questions why martyr rhetoric was chiefly reserved for children and heterosexuals with AIDS. I focus on Ryan White, a teenage hemophiliac widely-described as an AIDS martyr, and I compare how he was depicted in mainstream media to how gay men with AIDS were portrayed. Rhetoric of gay AIDS martyrs, however, was not entirely absent during the epidemic’s first fifteen years. Gay men with AIDS were described as martyrs in a speech given by the creator of the largest American AIDS memorial, the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt. I, therefore, analyze how the Quilt functioned within tropes of martyrdom. I also address two popular representations of gay men with AIDS that achieved mainstream success: the film Philadelphia and the play Angels in America. While the protagonists are not named as martyrs in either production, I highlight how the fictional characters in both productions function within a Christian martyrrial framework. I conclude the chapter by examining how prominent gay advocates presented AIDS within a supersessionist
narrative where the gay cultures of the 1970s were depicted as the dark past of gay history that had to be eradicated so gays would awaken to the light of monogamous marriage as the ideal way to achieve social inclusion in America.

Chapter four, which addresses Matthew Shepard, is the center of the project. The near-immediate and persistent framing of Shepard as a Christ-like martyr and pious Protestant most clearly exposes how Christian ideas have influenced secular gay advocacy and American gay social acceptance. In the chapter I investigate why Shepard’s death evoked outrage and activism throughout the United States, especially from straight Americans who had been apathetic, and antagonistic, toward gay men dying from AIDS. I examine how Shepard’s image was continually structured with Christian motifs, and I investigate why gay advocates recurrently presented him as a committed Christian who died a death similar to that of Jesus. In the chapter I also analyze how martyrs create discursive boundaries of “us” and “them.” In Shepard’s case, gay advocates constructed an us/them border in relation to the religious right and ex-gay ministries, suggesting that conservative Christians were responsible for creating a culture where murdering gays was tolerable. In turn, religious right groups and Christian publications, like Christianity Today, produced public relations campaigns to show their compassion for Shepard, a gay American who had unequivocally evoked empathy from a vast cross section of the

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60 When I use the term “religious right,” I am primarily referring to the Christian Right, or those Christians and Christian organizations actively involved in conservative politics where their agenda is, often, to shape public policy in ways based on their Christian values. When I use the term “conservative Christians,” I am referring to Christians who believe that the Bible holds divine truth for all times and who are also, likely, politically conservative. For a lengthier discussion of these terms, especially in how they relate to issues of gay and lesbian politics, see Tina Fetner, How the Religious Right Shaped Lesbian and Gay Activism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).
country. Shepard’s murder became the focus of multiple books, movies, and plays. One of those plays, *The Laramie Project*, quickly became, and remains, one of the most-produced plays in the United States. Given *The Laramie Project’s* popularity, I analyze the Christian motifs that pervade the show, and I proffer reasons for their ubiquitous presence in the play. Ultimately, the chapter demonstrates why Shepard was exalted as the model martyr of the gay movement and, in turn, how he functioned as the ideal late-twentieth century American gay citizen: a white, male, nonsexual, practicing Protestant.

The fifth chapter focuses on the suicide of gay college student Tyler Clementi. I structure the chapter as a comparative analysis of the narratives surrounding Clementi and Shepard. The deaths of both young men immediately ignited outrage and national dialogue about the place of gays in America. By 2010 Clementi’s suicide, more than his sexuality, was seen as an aberration that needed to be addressed and corrected. Clementi’s death prompted renewed national interest in “bullies,” and Clementi became the face of American gay youth. With Clementi as the national image of gay adolescents, gay youth were rendered axiomatically vulnerable. In turn, the It Gets Better project, an online campaign for adults to tell gay youth that life will improve, achieved vast popularity. I analyze some of the messages produced by the It Gets Better project, and I make an argument about how redemption from suffering was promised to queer youth through prescriptions to adhere to the Protestant sexual ethos. The chapter also explores how secular gay advocates presented Clementi’s suicide as redemptive, as creating possibilities for gay Americans that would not have been possible if he had lived. Finally, I examine some ways in which martyrs are meant to inspire a conversion of beliefs. I investigate the media attention that focused on Clementi’s mother and the conversion of
her beliefs about homosexuality that were grounded in her Evangelical church, but that changed after her son’s death. I also analyze how Clementi’s suicide was discussed within conservative Christian communities, of how many used Clementi as a reason to reconsider their rhetoric about homosexuality. By building off of earlier chapters, I also highlight how Clementi, Shepard, and Milk narrowly represent queer possibilities that do not promote diverse sexual or gender freedoms, while they also reinscribe a racial, gender, and religious hierarchy.

In the conclusion I highlight how discourses of gay martyrdom have primarily functioned as strategies for assimilation, not for radical social revolution. Martyrdom, however, is not an inherently assimilatory category, and martyrs need not represent or reflect the dominant social class. If gay advocates want to create martyrs, the martyrs could exemplify diverse sexual, gender, racial, and religious possibilities that transgress dominant ideologies of acceptable citizenship. The conclusion also highlights how Protestant Christian dominance is often overlooked in most critiques of American gay advocacy. Protestant dominance in secular gay advocacy has been largely effaced because of the long history of public antigay Christian condemnation. But the exclusive focus on antigay Christian attitudes in gay history, as I highlight throughout “Martyrdom and American Gay History,” ignores how secular gay advocates have used Christian concepts, rhetoric, and images as tools for promoting gay social acceptance.
CHAPTER 2
THE SAVIOR FIGURE: HARVEY MILK

In 2003 San Francisco’s International Museum of GLBT History, the first American museum dedicated to preserving gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender history, opened its doors to unveil the museum’s inaugural exhibit: “Saint Harvey – The Life and Afterlife of a Modern Gay Martyr.” The exhibition’s centerpiece was the bloodstained suit Harvey Milk wore when he was shot to death in 1978 by Dan White, Milk’s former colleague on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors.\(^{61}\) Milk’s suit was hung from the museum’s ceiling with outstretched arms so that it formed a perfect cross. Visitors approaching the elevated cross could cast their gaze upward to the bullet holes that punctured Milk’s sides and meditate on the dried blood that poured from his body in the moment of his death. As with the Christian narration of Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection, Milk’s murder was not how his story concluded at the museum’s exhibit. Instead, images and text beneath and around the cross moved memory of Milk past his death to display an ongoing legacy, an “afterlife,” of how gay activism in America was

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\(^{61}\) Supervisor Dan White, Milk’s assassin, also murdered San Francisco Mayor George Moscone just minutes prior to shooting Milk. The double murder occurred two weeks after White resigned from his elected position on the Board of Supervisors. White petitioned Mayor Moscone to reinstate him shortly after he resigned. Milk vociferously lobbied the mayor not to reappoint White since he typically voted against their more liberal coalition. A reporter notified White that Mayor Moscone would not reinstate him, and the next day, November 27, 1978, he crawled through a window of San Francisco City Hall to avoid walking through the building’s metal detectors. He went to Mayor Moscone’s office and, after a brief argument, pulled out a gun and shot him four times. White then walked across City Hall to Milk’s office. He asked Milk to join him in his office where he proceeded to shoot him five times. White turned himself in to the police later that day and confessed to the double assassination.
galvanized because of his murder. Using Christian imagery and ideas, the message at the museum’s clothing cross was clear: Harvey Milk’s spilled blood, the blood of a martyr, transformed America.

The GLBT Museum’s decision to use Christian motifs to structure Harvey Milk’s memory was not an original approach to framing his death or legacy. Pro-gay writers and activists have habitually constructed the Jewish Harvey Milk in ways that rely on Christian ideas. Indeed, the exhibit’s title of Milk as a martyr reflects frequently employed rhetoric in relation to Milk where gay advocates have insisted that his death had a transformative influence on American gay politics. Invocations of martyrdom, as scholar of early Christianity, Elizabeth Castelli, writes, “can be understood as one form of refusing the meaninglessness of death itself, of insisting that suffering and death do not signify emptiness and nothingness, which they might otherwise seem to imply.” To call Milk a martyr, in other words, is to demand that his death had purpose and to deny that his murder was a meaningless tragedy void of transformative potential. Consequently, the “Saint Harvey” exhibit enshrines Milk’s bloody garments as a cross, a Christian symbol of redemptive sacrifice, and displays three sets of images of a living, smiling Harvey Milk who ensures visitors that his murder neither concluded his story nor his contributions to the country.

62 The International Museum of GLBT History in San Francisco changed its name to the GLBT History Museum after its initial opening in 2003.

63 Elizabeth Castelli, Martyrdom and Memory (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 33, original emphasis.

64 For an extended scholarly meditation on the exhibit, see Jordy Jones, “A Martyr in the Archive: The Life and Afterlife of Harvey Milk’s Suit,” Somatechnics 1, no. 2 (2011): 327-387.
Figure 1. “Saint Harvey” exhibit. Photo by Daniel Nicoletta, August 22, 2003.
This chapter is an exploration of the many ways in which Harvey Milk has been constructed as a gay martyr, as well as how his death has been used within the history of American gay activism since the 1970s. I am especially interested in analyzing the messages that are produced by representations of Milk that memorialize him as an eternal emblem for gay rights. To structure my analysis, I will begin by providing a brief biographical sketch of Milk. Much more detail about Milk’s life will be presented throughout the chapter as I compare various depictions of Milk to materials from diverse archives. To understand Milk’s political activism and many of his critiques of straight society, I believe it necessary to grasp the historical setting in which Milk lived and, eventually, worked as a gay rights advocate. I will, therefore, provide a historical background to the years leading up to and during Milk’s time as a politician and gay activist in the 1970s, especially focusing on the rise of both gay liberation efforts and the religious right. After situating Milk within this historical setting, I will analyze narrative representations of Harvey Milk. Because Milk was Jewish in life, I will pay particular attention to how his Jewishness is portrayed in representations that memorialize him. And because Milk has been upheld specifically as a gay martyr, I will also especially focus on how Milk’s sexuality has been depicted in these representations. Throughout the chapter my analysis will primarily, although not exclusively, focus on four representations of Harvey Milk: the biography The Mayor of Castro Street: The Life and Times of Harvey Milk (1982), the documentary The Times of Harvey Milk (1984), the opera Harvey Milk (1995), and the major motion picture Milk (2008). I have selected these representations because they span three decades and suggest continued interest in preserving, and constructing, memory of Milk. Each of the selected representations also received
significant national attention in both gay and mainstream presses. Throughout the chapter I will analyze and compare these portrayals of Milk to his own writings, speeches, and interviews, as well as to newspaper and magazine articles about him.65

As this chapter will demonstrate, the Jewish Harvey Milk has been posthumously Christianized by pro-gay writers who have attempted to construct Milk as a universal symbol for gay rights. Because Milk’s Jewishness reinforced his multiple differences from the dominant Christian society, both his Jewish identity and the formative role of Jewish history on his political activism have been minimized in many representations so that he better resembles the average, white, American, Protestant man. Milk’s Jewishness, though, has not simply been diminished; gay writers have habitually constructed Milk according to a Christian narrative strategy where death gets converted from defeat into a victory, where Milk’s murder becomes the genesis and teleological promise of a better world. In turn, Milk’s national notoriety has grown tremendously since he died, thereby overshadowing others who have contributed significantly to gay and lesbian history, such as the actual first openly-gay elected US official, Elaine Noble, whose path-breaking election has been largely ignored and forgotten so that Milk can be

65 In order to trace shifting historical constructions of Milk, I examined the gay and lesbian magazines The Advocate and The Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide, as well as The New York Times from the 1970s through 2013. I also studied local San Francisco newspapers, like gay publication the Bay Area Reporter, as well as numerous newspapers and magazines throughout the country that published articles on Milk from the 1970s through the present day. I have been grateful to scholars Jason Edward Black and Charles E. Morris III, and also to writer Vince Emery, for transcribing and publishing many of Milk’s interviews, speeches, and writings so that these primary sources would be easily accessible to future researchers. See Jason Edward Black and Charles E. Morris, eds., An Archive of Hope: Harvey Milk’s Speeches and Writings (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013). See Vince Emery, ed., The Harvey Milk Interviews: In His Own Words (San Francisco: Vince Emery Productions, 2012).
remembered as the gay movement’s solitary savior figure. And although Milk has been upheld specifically as a gay martyr, Milk’s ideas about maintaining multiple concurrent romantic and sexual relationships have been erased in most representations so that he better aligns with arguments for same-sex marriage that proliferated in the years after his death. Consequently, in death, Harvey Milk has gone from being a Jewish, liberationist, polyamorist to a Christianized, mainstream, monogamist. In the shadow of AIDS and homophobic blame directed at gay men for spreading a plague through sexual licentiousness, pro-gay writers constructed Milk according to the norms of the Protestant sexual ethos where sex must be relegated to coupled, domesticated, monogamy so that Milk, and gay Americans with him, could be viewed as respectable, civilized citizens.

Biographical Sketch of Harvey Milk

Harvey Bernard Milk was born on Long Island, New York in 1930. He grew up in a middle-class Jewish family, played football, and finished high school in three years. Milk studied math and history in college before entering the United States Navy. After the navy he worked a string of jobs, mostly in New York City, as a high school teacher, financial analyst, and Broadway producer. While he dated men during this time, he was not involved in gay activism, nor did he disclose his sexuality to his parents. Milk moved to San Francisco in 1972 and first ran for public office in 1973. After three unsuccessful campaigns, Milk was elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, one of eleven city council positions, in November 1977. He passed two pieces of legislation during his eleven months in office—a gay rights ordinance that prohibited employment discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, and a “pooper scooper” ordinance that mandated dog owners to pick up their pets’ excrement from public places—before he was
assassinated, along with San Francisco mayor George Moscone, on November 27, 1978. The assassin, Dan White, had also been an elected member of San Francisco’s Board of Supervisors until he resigned from his position two weeks prior to the double murder. Milk’s national notoriety expanded exponentially after his death. Less than four years after he died, Milk’s biography, *The Mayor of Castro Street: The Life and Times of Harvey Milk*, was published and sold over 100,000 copies in hardback.66 Two years later the documentary, *The Times of Harvey Milk*, was released and then won an Academy Award for best documentary. The following year a high school for gay and lesbian teenagers was founded in Milk’s name in New York City. In the early-to-mid-nineties, a stage play, opera, and musical theater production about Milk all premiered. And the twenty-first century witnessed multiple books, short stories, monuments, plazas, a US postage stamp, and a major motion picture that memorialized Milk as a pioneer for American gay activism.

**Historical Background and Setting**

Harvey Milk’s political career took shape in the years following the mythic birth of the gay rights movement in 1969 at the Stonewall riots in New York City. For days in June of that year, gay and transgender patrons of the Stonewall Inn fought police who tried, as was routine, to arrest them for congregating inside a gay bar.67 Stonewall, however, was not the first time gays, lesbians, or transgender Americans fought back

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66 In addition to selling 100,000 hardback copies, *The Mayor of Castro Street* has also sold more than 600,000 paperback copies. See Janice Albert, “Randy Shilts, 1951-1994,” CATE: California Association of Teachers of English, accessed January 31, 2014. [http://www.cateweb.org/CA_Authors/shilts.htm](http://www.cateweb.org/CA_Authors/shilts.htm)

67 Lesbian and gay communities throughout the United States ritually commemorate the Stonewall riots every June with “pride” parades and festivals.
against police brutality, nor the first time they incited a riot. Despite Stonewall’s place in collective memory as the genesis of the gay and lesbian movement, post-WWII American gay rights efforts actually began between 1950 and 1951 with the founding of the Mattachine Society in Los Angeles, California.\textsuperscript{68} The name Mattachine was a reference to medieval masquerade performance troupes, so the term was used to signify the masqueraded or hidden lives of gays and lesbians. Only forty-two gays and lesbians attended the Mattachine Society’s first national convention in 1954.\textsuperscript{69} A year later a group of eight lesbians broke off from the male-dominated Mattachine Society and started a lesbian rights organization, Daughters of Bilitis. The group’s name was based on an obscure 1894 erotic poem, “Song of Bilitis,” thereby concealing that the organization was composed of lesbians. The Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis were part of what came to be known as the homophile movement, a gay rights effort meant to emphasize same-gender love and relationships rather than sex. The homophile groups of the 1950s and early 1960s mostly focused on producing writings that could be used to educate psychologists, social workers, and teachers about homosexuality and the problems faced by gays and lesbians.

\textsuperscript{68} I am specifying “post-WWII” gay rights groups because I do not want to give the impression that gay communities and organizations only formed after WWII. As George Chauncey has eloquently pieced together, early twentieth century New York City had visible gay male enclaves. During the 1930s and especially into the middle decades of the century, gay life became more concealed and less out in the open until the gay liberation period began in the late 1960s. See George Chauncey, \textit{Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940} (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

\textsuperscript{69} This figure is reported by John D’Emilio who has written an extensive history of gay and lesbian activism and the various homophile groups leading up to the Stonewall Riots. See John D’Emilio, \textit{Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States 1940-1970} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).
Many of the women and men involved in the homophile movement were uninterested in publically declaring that they were gay, in large part, because gays and lesbians in the 1950s and 1960s were the focus of state-sponsored persecution.

Institutional antigay policies proliferated during this period, in part, because the US military had become increasingly aware of male homosexual activity during WWII. Fears of widespread homosexuality were compounded when, three years after the war in 1948, the Kinsey Report on male sexuality was published and claimed that more than one-third of American men had experienced orgasm through sexual contact with another man. These events contributed to what is now known as the “lavender scare,” a period of acute state-sanctioned repression, targeting, and surveillance of anyone suspected of homosexuality. During this Cold War setting, to be gay or lesbian was to be as un-American as communists. The FBI monitored Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis meetings, vice squads regularly raided gay bars to arrest patrons, the names of people arrested in raids of bars and cruising spots were printed in newspapers, teachers were fired for being suspected of homosexuality, and gays and lesbians were legally barred from entering or immigrating to the United States. 

At the same time as this overt government-sponsored persecution of gays and lesbians, heterosexual men, and those who passed as heterosexual, received unprecedented privileges through the GI Bill.71 Male heterosexual recipients of the GI

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71 Women veterans were eligible for GI Bill benefits. However, until 1967 women were forbidden from comprising more than two percent of the United States military, thus
Bill obtained access to higher education and home ownership, giving them much greater chances to enter or remain in the American middle class. GI Bill benefits, however, became ineligible in 1945 to anyone who had been discharged from the military “because of homosexual acts or tendencies.” Gay men who could not, or did not, pass as straight were unable to profit from the GI Bill’s advantages. And since women accounted for only two percent of the armed forces through the 1960s, GI Bill benefits were largely about creating male heterosexual breadwinners. As Margo Canaday writes, the GI Bill “institutionalized heterosexuality by channeling resources to men so that…the economic incentives for women to marry remained firmly in place.” Put differently, the GI Bill largely codified straight male economic dominance in the middle decades of the twentieth century. Not only were known gay men disqualified from receiving the extensive benefits of the GI Bill, most lesbians needed to marry a man in order to have middle class financial security. For many lesbians and gay men during this time, Harvey Milk included, concealing one’s gay or lesbian sexuality was common so that one would not be a social or criminal outcast.

By the mid-1960s gay and lesbian groups started to organize small public protests in cities such as Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York. Some gays and lesbians also began to advocate “coming out,” or publically declaring oneself as gay as a strategic overwhelmingly directing GI Bill benefits to men in the two decades after WWII. See, for example, Margo Canaday, The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 171, especially.


73 Ibid., 171.
political tactic for gaining rights. Still, just before the Stonewall riots in June 1969, John D’Emilio writes that, “there were perhaps fifty gay and lesbian social change organizations in the United States. By 1973, four years after Stonewall, there were more than 800.” During the period from 1969 to 1973, at the time when Harvey Milk moved to San Francisco and ran his first political campaign, gay liberation groups emerged. The gay liberationists did not simply want gay and lesbian rights. They wanted to undo all the ways in which social institutions limited sexual possibilities. Building off the work of the women’s movement, gay liberationists, like many feminists, argued that sexuality and sex roles were social constructs that were not based in nature. They believed that by resisting heterosexual models of lifelong marriage and monogamy, American society would become less patriarchal and less oppressive toward sexual minorities. Historian Michael Bronski writes that, “Whereas homophile groups argued that homosexuals could find safety by promoting privacy, gay liberation argued that safety and liberation were found only by living in, challenging, and changing the public sphere.” While many of the gay liberationists’ revolutionary ideas faded over the course of the 1970s, the decade of Harvey Milk’s entrée into politics witnessed profound changes for gays and lesbians. After persistent lobbying by gay activists, the American Psychological Association removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders in 1973. Additionally, during the 1970s, more than half of US states abolished sodomy laws that had previously made


consensual sex between gay adults a crime. With the success of the feminist movement and more economic opportunities for women, an increasingly large number of lesbian organizations developed throughout the 1970s. Gays and lesbians of color also began to create their own organizations in the 1970s, in large part as a reaction to white dominance and racism in many gay activist groups. And, as Gayle Rubin highlights, during the 1970s, “sexual migration was occurring on a scale so significant that it began to have a recognizable impact on urban politics in the United States.” Select US cities began to see a visibly large influx of gays and lesbians moving to particular neighborhoods. The Castro District of San Francisco, where Harvey Milk lived, was one such gay enclave that developed in the 1970s and that included not only thousands of gay and lesbian residents, but also social institutions like bars, bathhouses, and bookstores.

The 1970s also witnessed the increasingly prominent rise of conservative Christian involvement in American political life. In 1976, for example, Jimmy Carter became the first US president to describe himself as a born-again Christian. And in 1977 gay activism and conservative Christian involvement in American public life collided in ways that transformed both the gay movement and what would eventually be known as the religious right. In January 1977, Anita Bryant, a former beauty queen and orange juice spokesperson, embarked on a campaign to repeal an ordinance in Dade County.

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77 According to Michael Bronski, “Between 1969 and 1979, more than thirty thousand gay people, the majority of them men, moved to San Francisco.” See Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States*, 216.
Florida that protected gays and lesbians against employment discrimination. Situating herself as an evangelical Christian, Bryant famously declared that “homosexuals cannot reproduce—so they must recruit. And to freshen their ranks, they must recruit the youth of America.”

Bryant insisted that gays and lesbians preyed on children in hopes of converting them to homosexuality. Her claims found receptive audiences. After a sweeping victory in Dade County, Bryant took her “Save Our Children” crusade across the nation as citizens in other cities proposed similar efforts to repeal existing laws that had protected gays and lesbians. The success and attention of Bryant’s campaign brought the issue of homosexuality into the national spotlight in ways that had never before occurred in US history. In turn, news outlets sought responses from gay and lesbian advocates and, as Tina Fetter writes, “No longer would lesbian and gay activists fight to get issues relating to homosexuality into the news. Now, for better or worse, they were a top story around the nation.”

Following this antigay momentum, in 1978 California state senator John Briggs proposed Proposition 6, colloquially called the Briggs Initiative, which would have prohibited gays and lesbians from working in California public schools. Proposition 6 was defeated, in large part, because of the work of Harvey Milk and a team of other activists who used John Briggs and Anita Bryant’s rhetoric to mobilize gays into activism on unprecedented levels. But just as gays and lesbians experienced increased national visibility, politically-involved conservative Christians also

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discovered that speaking out against homosexuality had extensive appeal. Along with abortion, homosexuality was a focal point of the emergent religious right who felt that President Carter had not done enough to bring evangelical Christianity into the public sphere. Thus, at the time of Harvey Milk’s death in 1978, condemning homosexuality proved to be a strategy that both galvanized the religious right and that garnered broad appeal throughout the United States.

Jewish in Life, Christianized in Death

As the “Saint Harvey” exhibit that opens this chapter makes clear, memory of Harvey Milk’s life has been shaped by Christian motifs even though he was Jewish. I will, therefore, begin my analysis of narrative representations of Milk, and of his posthumous role in American gay activism, by investigating how his Jewishness has been depicted and remembered. I am particularly interested in exploring why Milk’s Jewishness has not only been frequently minimized and overlooked, but also why his Jewishness has been habitually replaced with Christian ideas and teachings.

The details of Milk’s Jewishness, and descriptions of how Jewish history and culture were formative influences on his life and political career, are available in news archives, in collections of his speeches, interviews, and writings, and in the nearly 400-page biography, *The Mayor of Castro Street*, that was published less than four years after

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his death. Milk was the grandson of Lithuanian Jewish immigrants who Americanized their last name from Milch, a derivative of the Yiddish word *milchik*, to its English equivalent, “milk.” His family founded a synagogue on Long Island, and when Jewish families in their area were denied access to elite private clubs, Milk’s family also established a Jewish social club. When Milk was thirteen his parents told him about the 1943 Warsaw Ghetto Uprising where Polish Jews attempted to fight German soldiers, largely knowing they would die fighting, rather than get taken to Nazi concentration camps. Milk referenced the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising as a profoundly shaping example of bravery in the face of persecution for the remainder of his life. In high school Milk took on the nickname “Glimpy Milch,” as a way to reclaim his grandparents’ last name and to self-deprecatingly poke fun at his larger than average nose and ears. In college Milk was a member of a Jewish fraternity and a regular participant in various Jewish activities on campus, such as the college Hillel and Intercollegiate Zionist Federation. While living in Manhattan as an adult, Milk’s first boyfriend, Joe Campbell, described Milk as having a

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“persecution complex,”82 because he believed most people were anti-Semitic. Milk, in fact, referenced anti-Semitism and the Holocaust throughout his adult life, often analogizing anyone who opposed him to Hitler or the Nazis. By the time Milk arrived to San Francisco at the age of 42, he could still carry on bits of conversation in Yiddish, the language of Eastern European Jews spoken by his grandparents and parents. In 1977, the year Milk won a seat on the Board of Supervisors, San Francisco became home to the country’s first synagogue specifically for gay Jews, Sha’ar Zahav. According to the synagogue’s rabbi, Milk attended services at Sha’ar Zahav a few times, not so much to pray, but to socialize and to “get votes.”83

Milk repeatedly referred to himself as a gay Jew to a wide variety of audiences throughout his political career. In fact, much of his own constructed political image was that of a gay Jew who understood what it meant to be an outsider in America. For example, during his first campaign an opposing candidate quoted, almost verbatim, Milk’s platform on his flyers. Milk, in turn, released a press statement saying, “The fact that MILK, a Jewish Democrat, now has his platform being used, almost intact, by a Republican, buries the issue of MILK’S homosexuality…the Republican must feel…that the need for a new direction in our leadership is far more important than MILK’S


homosexuality.” In this instance, Milk was mostly making a point that his sexuality was irrelevant to his ability to lead and work on behalf of everyone in San Francisco. And yet, when he could have simply reminded his audience that he was a Democrat, he made sure everyone knew he was a Jewish Democrat. His Jewishness was an inextricable part of what defined him and shaped him politically. As another example, one 1970s news article reported that after a San Francisco firefighter had been killed, “Milk sent a box of cookies to the Fire Department, explaining that it was a Jewish custom to send food to a grieving family.” When Milk was murdered, the first memorial service was conducted at San Francisco’s gay synagogue, and the second at the much larger Reform Jewish congregation, Temple Emanu-el.

Milk’s biography, The Mayor of Castro Street, contains substantial information about Milk’s Jewishness that greatly recedes from public memory in subsequent representations of him. Although his identity as a secular Jew was firmly established in life, in death Milk’s Jewishness gradually faded so that he could function as a gay activist whose Jewish particularities would not reinforce his multiple differences from the dominant Christian society. While his biography offers a robust perspective of Milk’s life, later representations frequently ignore or minimize his Jewishness. To explore the receding memory of Milk as a secular Jew and the reasons for such erasures of his Jewishness, I will examine representations of Milk from three decades, primarily the

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documentary *The Times of Harvey Milk* (1984), the opera *Harvey Milk* (1995), and the film *Milk* (2008). I will also briefly explore the musical *The Harvey Milk Show* (1991).\(^86\)

The first widely-acclaimed representation of Harvey Milk after *The Mayor of Castro Street* was the 1984 Academy Award-winning documentary *The Times of Harvey Milk*, a film that engages in what I describe as the “Jesus Narrative Phenomenon.” By Jesus Narrative Phenomenon, I am referring to the biographical structure given to Jesus’ life in the Gospels where brief details of Jesus’ birth are given before the Gospel writers skip over decades and jump to a few years before Jesus’ death when he was gathering a following. The Gospel writers place especial emphasis on Jesus’ death and an afterlife that included many people who never knew him, but who were inspired and converted by his story. The structure of the Jesus Narrative Phenomenon, thus, refers to biographical narration that skips over the particularities and muddiness of one’s life by jumping from birth to the time leading up to a retroactively-read sacrificial death. Related to this narrative approach is also the Jewishness of Jesus. The Gospel writers are clear that Jesus was a Jew and called rabbi by many followers. But even before the canon of Christian scriptures closed, the Jewishness of Jesus was refashioned so that he could function a

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\(^86\) I am not giving as much space to the musical *The Harvey Milk Show* because it did not garner the same level of national attention as the other representations that I am analyzing. However, the musical did run during three different seasons at a regional theater in Atlanta, Georgia in the 1990s. For a scholarly essay on the overt Christianization of Milk in *The Harvey Milk Show* see, Edward R. Gray, “The Harvey Milk Show: Violence, Desire, and Gay Popular Culture,” in *Gay Religion*, ed. Scott Thumma and Edward R. Gray (New York, AltaMira Press, 2004). Zachary Adrian Dorsey also provides summary and analysis of the musical in his dissertation. See Zachary Adrian Dorsey, “Embodied Resistance: A Historiographic Intervention into the Performance of Queer Violence” (doctoral dissertation, The University of Texas at Austin, 2007).
universal source of hope for the entire world, rather than for a small group of Jews. Jesus’ Jewishness faded, in other words, so that he could be accessible and admirable to a much larger audience.

As with the narration of Jesus’ life in the Gospels, the documentary *The Times of Harvey Milk* only provides a brief glimpse of the family and world into which Milk was born in 1930. The film barely touches on Milk as a young adult, quickly showing a picture of him in a navy uniform while also referencing that he worked in the financial sector before moving to San Francisco. True to the Jesus Narrative Phenomenon, the documentary quickly jumps from Milk’s birth to a few years before his death when he was gathering a political following, creating a few enemies, and running for his first election in 1973. The documentary contains only two references to Milk’s Jewishness. The first is in the description of Milk’s birth when the narrator says that he was “born in 1930, the second son of middle-class Jewish parents,”87 which actually only refers to Milk’s parents being Jewish and not the role of Judaism, Jewish ideas, or Jewish history on his own life. The second instance is later in the documentary when a story is recounted of how Jimmy Carter’s evangelical sister, Ruth Carter-Stapleton, told Milk she could convert him and that, even though he was Jewish, his homosexuality would go away if he accepted Jesus Christ. In this context, Milk’s Jewishness is brought up so a story could be told of how the born-again President’s sister believed homosexuality could be cleansed through Christ. Milk’s Jewishness in *The Times of Harvey Milk* is, thus, never presented as constitutive of his political ethic or sense of self.

The Jesus Narrative Phenomenon, as I see it, is part of why the search for the “historical Jesus” is so vexing. Not only is the bulk of Jesus’ life missing in the Gospels, but separating the myth from the man is a nearly impossible endeavor. The savior figure, in other words, is not a historical category because of how the savior figure’s life and legacy are strategically enhanced. For instance, in writing about how Jesus was refashioned from a Jew who did not want to die in the Gospel of Mark to a figure more resonant with Greek ideals of strength and willing self-sacrifice in the Gospel of Luke, scholar of early Christianity, Candida Moss, writes that the “effects of Luke’s heavy-handed editorial work have been devastating for our knowledge of what actually happened at the time. The historical facts of what occurred during Jesus’s last days were overwritten with a theology of noble death and martyrdom.” In other words, as Jesus’ story was reconfigured to garner greater appeal among non-Jewish Greek audiences, his character gradually took on attributes most esteemed by Greek culture. Since the Greeks could not imagine worshiping a God who feared death, Moss and others argue that Jesus’ final words in Mark of “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” were replaced in Luke with “Into your hands I commit my spirit,” to show a God of strength and noble acceptance of death, a God that Greek audiences could more readily respect and accept.

The myth of Harvey Milk similarly grows considerably when examining the 1995 opera bearing his name. The Harvey Milk opera is an elaborate embellishment, staging,

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89 Harvey Milk the opera premiered at the Houston Grand Opera in 1995. That same year it also had a run at the New York City Opera. In 1996 the opera was performed in San Francisco. The opera was profiled three times in the New York Times, and articles about
for example, a crucial scene of Milk fighting in the Stonewall riots even though he was neither a participant in them nor involved in gay activism at the time. By inserting Milk into Stonewall, the opera presents Milk as the savior figure responsible for initiating the modern gay rights movement. Gays and lesbians, so this narration instructs, would be living in secrecy and fear were it not for the heroism and sacrifice of Harvey Milk. And as with the Gospels, Milk’s Jewishness, in this representation especially, is part of how he moves, and how the country moves with him, from times of darkness to redemption. For instance, in the opera’s opening scene audiences learn that Milk is Jewish as the words of Kaddish, the Jewish mourners’ prayer, are recited just after he is assassinated. The story then moves backward to Milk’s teenage years. As a young Milk fearfully explores the dangerous dark shadows of pre-Stonewall Central Park cruising, the Holocaust is invoked by his mother singing, “They forced us to wear the yellow star…they packed us into trains…they tattooed numbers on our arms.” While Milk’s parents lived in the US and were never in concentration camps, the Holocaust reference here establishes Milk’s Jewish familial background and concurrently analogizes Nazi persecution of Jews to pre-Stonewall discrimination against gays in America. As his mother “remembers” Nazi persecution, the young Milk is handcuffed by a plain-clothed police officer who was arresting men for cruising. The Holocaust analogy in the Harvey Milk opera is apparent throughout the first act. The set, for instance, is a pink triangle

The opera also ran in such publications as Newsweek, the Los Angeles Times, and The Times of London. Harvey Milk the opera continues to be performed in the twenty-first century. For example, the opera will premiere in Melbourne, Australia in February 2015.

containing closet doors. The pink triangle, like the yellow star for Jews, was what gay prisoners wore in Nazi concentration camps. The set’s closet doors attached to a pink triangle are, therefore, meant to signify a time in America, before Milk’s intervention, when gays and lesbians had to hide and live in secrecy.

After the fabricated scene of Milk fighting in the Stonewall riots, the entire set changes and the script notes read, “The walls behind them break apart to reveal a blazing white light as the moon is eclipsed by the sun...We see that the back of Harvey’s white shirt is stained with blood. They [Milk and his boyfriend Scott Smith] walk together into the path of the sun.”91 I will return to how this narration of moving from darkness to light fits within a specifically Christian narrative strategy, but for now I want to highlight the opera’s focus on Milk’s blood as a precursor to the light of possibility. As with the clothing cross at the GLBT History Museum, Milk’s blood becomes a focal point, an emphasis on his willing sacrifice for a better world where he breaks open the closet for everyone, even if it means his own suffering and death in the process. Like the blood of Christian martyrs, Milk’s blood in these representations matters.

The Harvey Milk opera, much more than most other portrayals of him, continually remembers Milk’s Jewishness.92 The show’s penultimate scene even tries to construct

91 Ibid., 19.

92 The composer, Stewart Wallace, and the librettist, Michael Korie, are both Jewish and said in interviews that they were interested in capturing Milk’s Jewish identity. For example, an article in the Los Angeles Times says that Wallace and Korie “emphasize how important Harvey Milk’s Jewish background is not only to their own identification with Milk but also to the kind of politician he became.” As stated earlier, the opera makes Milk’s Jewishness a focal point much more than The Times of Harvey Milk or Milk, even though, as I argue, it still Christianizes Milk through motifs of redemptive sacrifice and resurrection. See Mark Swed, “A Life Custom-Made for Opera: Harvey Milk, gay
Milk as a modern-day Moses when a messenger sings to him, “Look before you and see the place that was promised. I have let you see it with your own eyes though you may not cross there.” Like Moses who wondered the desert for forty years never able to enter the promise land with his people, Milk is similarly depicted as a prophet unable to see the full fruits of his leadership. Yet a key difference exists between Moses’ story in the Torah and the portrayal of Milk in the Harvey Milk opera. In the Torah, Moses is told that he will not enter the promise land before he dies. In the opera, however, Milk is told that he cannot cross with his people into the “place that was promised” after he is murdered and after the messenger helps him “rise.” While the Jewish narration of Moses leaves him dead in the last passages of Deuteronomy, the Christian narration of Jesus does not allow death to conclude his story. Similarly, in the opera’s final moment, the resurrected Milk removes the young Milk’s handcuffs from the night when he was arrested in Central Park. The concluding Christian-inspired message is clear: Harvey Milk died so that others may live in a world far better than the one into which he was born. Even though the opera portrays Milk as a Jew in life, as with the Gospels of Jesus, the story also Christianizes him through motifs of resurrection and sacrificial death.

Another 1990s representation of Milk, the musical The Harvey Milk Show, also employs explicitly Christian concepts that configure Milk as a leader worthy of

activist, San Francisco politician and martyr is the soul of a new contemporary work,” Los Angeles Times (Los Angeles, CA), Jan. 15, 1995.


94 Ibid., 57.
admiration. The show was originally produced for a regional theater in Atlanta, and the authors presumably decided to present a Harvey Milk who would be relatable to the predominantly Protestant Southern audiences. The musical only briefly references Milk’s Jewish identity once when Milk says, “Catholics don’t like me because I’m a Jew—Protestants don’t like me because I’m a Jew—Protestants, Catholics, and Jews don’t like me because I’m gay.”\footnote{Dan Pruitt and Patrick Hutchison, “The Harvey Milk Show,” in \textit{Staging Gay Lives: An Anthology of Contemporary Gay Theater}, ed. John M. Clum (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), especially 60-62.} The show’s score features gospel music, hymns, and the first act concludes with a song that quotes from the Beatitudes of Jesus. Jesus is the character mold for Milk throughout the show as he heals wounds, brings peace, and preaches a new gospel. And similar to the \textit{Harvey Milk} opera, the musical’s epilogue is of a resurrected Milk instructing his disciple to continue the mission he started. The Christianization of Milk in \textit{The Harvey Milk Show} is so explicit that religion scholar, Edward Gray, has written that, “To call Milk a Jesus-like figure in the play is not too deep an analysis. He delivers a Sermon on the Mount. He is killed, like Jesus, as a scapegoat. And he is resurrected, too.”\footnote{Edward R. Gray, “The Harvey Milk Show: Violence, Desire, and Gay Popular Culture,” in \textit{Gay Religion}, ed. Scott Thumma and Edward R. Gray (New York, AltaMira Press, 2004), 336.} In obvious ways, then, this Southern musical constructs Harvey Milk as an ideal gay American worthy of respect and admiration through unambiguous Christian motifs.

Depictions of Milk’s Jewishness almost entirely fade in what is likely the most popular and farthest-reaching portrayal of Harvey Milk: the 2008 major motion picture
Milk. Harvey Milk’s posthumous popularity surged to such an extent following the release of the Academy Award-winning film that the gay and lesbian magazine, The Advocate, described Milk as “bigger than ever,” and titled one of their cover stories, in overt Christian language, “The Resurrection of Harvey Milk.”97 The film only directly mentions Milk’s Jewish identity once. In an early scene Milk says to a neighboring store owner, “I would like to join…the Eureka Valley Merchants Association. I’m not an interloper. A Jew perhaps, but I hope you’ll forgive that.”98 When the store owner is rude and walks away, Milk calls him a “schmuck.”99 That is as Jewish as he gets in the major motion picture: “schmuck” and “a Jew, perhaps.” Even though in life he made regular references to his Jewish identity and to Jewish history, the movie’s screenwriter, Dustin Lance Black, leaves Milk almost entirely unmarked by Jewishness. Black also published a book, Milk: A Pictorial History of Harvey Milk, where he similarly ignores Milk’s Jewish identity.100 Although the book is framed as a biography with texts and images, the volume never mentions that Milk is Jewish nor the formative role of Jewish history in shaping Milk’s life and political ethic.


98 Milk, directed by Gus Van Sant (2008; Los Angeles, CA: Universal Studios, 2009), DVD.

99 Ibid.

100 Dustin Lance Black, Milk: A Pictorial History of Harvey Milk (New York: Newmarket Press, 2009).
While no representation is ever complete, the erasure of Harvey Milk’s Jewishness in *Milk* and other representations contributes, I argue, to a particular construction of Milk that allows him to function better as the gay-American everyman.\(^{101}\) The Warsaw Ghetto-referencing, Yiddish-speaking, Lithuanian-American, secular Jew does not fit within the Protestant American imaginary as a universal, relatable figure; his Jewish particularities reinforce his multiple differences from the dominant Christian society. Those differences have been downplayed or diminished so that attention is primarily focused on gay rights. Martyrdom, after all, is not just about valorizing death, giving meaning to suffering, and inverting victimhood. As the second century Church father, Tertullian, wrote, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church,”\(^{102}\) meaning that martyrs are meant to be agents of conversion. Therefore, for those who emblemize him, Milk must inspire as vast of an audience as possible. By veiling Milk’s Jewishness, middle-class, white, Christian Americans find a man who seems less foreign. In the hope that the primarily Christian spectators of his story will better understand him, Milk’s Jewishness has been minimized so that audiences will mostly focus on how Milk would have been accepted if not for his gay sexuality.

The elision of Milk’s Jewishness in many representations can also be partially explained, I believe, in how Milk mostly saw himself as a secular Jew. With the exception of the creators of the *Harvey Milk* opera, many who have constructed

\(^{101}\) In addition to representations of Milk already discussed in this chapter, *Execution of Justice*, a dramatic play that focuses on the murder trial of Dan White, Milk’s assassin, also never mentions Milk’s Jewish identity.

representations of Milk have overlooked or failed to notice the formative role of Jewishness on Milk’s sense of self, almost as if they believe he disavowed Judaism. While Jews construct Jewish identity and participate in Jewish communities in myriad ways, Jews like Milk can be anti-religion without rejecting Judaism because, for many Jews, Jewishness is an ethnicity more than a religion. Whereas belief is a central facet of many versions of Protestant Christianity, Jewish identity is not dependent on what one believes. Jews can question or even reject ideas about God, an afterlife, and dietary laws without disavowing one’s Jewish identity. As an adult, with a few exceptions, Milk mostly did not participate in the religious dimensions of Jewish life. He rarely attended synagogue, was not known to pray, and was not observant of Jewish law. But this does not mean that he was unshaped by Jewishness, Jewish history, or his Jewish upbringing.

In excising the formative role of Milk’s Jewish identity, he stands in visible opposition to those who are portrayed as heavily influenced by their religious communities. For example, in the movie Milk, the scenes that superficially focus on religion involve either

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103 Another exception is the short children’s picture book The Harvey Milk Story that both remembers Milk’s Jewishness and emphasizes the formative role of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising on Milk as a teenager. See Kari Krakow and David Gardner, The Harvey Milk Story (Ridley Park, PA: Two Lives Publishing, 2002).

104 Because faith is not a defining aspect of Jewishness, Judaism does not map well onto Protestant-informed ideas of what constitutes religion and functions more like an ethnic group for many Jews. For a description of how American Judaism has tried to comport to Protestant standards of religion, largely predicated on faith, in ways that often do not fit well, see Laura Levitt, “Revisiting Jewish Secularism in America,” in Secularisms, ed. Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008). For descriptions of how belief is constitutive of Protestant identity and, in turn, how belief frames common notions of what constitutes “religion,” see Tisa Wenger, We Have a Religion: The 1920s Pueblo Indian Dance Controversy and American Religious Freedom (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).
Anita Bryant and her antigay crusade or Dan White, Milk’s assassin, attending his son’s baptism in church. The relegation of religion to scenes of antigay Anita Bryant and Milk’s assassin configure religion in opposition to gay lives. Since Milk fought for gay rights and against the likes of Anita Bryant, many of these representations miss how Milk was both anti-religion and a proud Jew whose Jewishness, by his own admission, informed his activism. Moreover, by constructing Milk as unmarked by Judaism, the American secular sphere is imagined as the place where gay possibilities flourish free from the dogmatism and oppression of religious communities, even though, as I will show throughout this and subsequent chapters, gay activism since Milk’s death has been largely shaped by Christianity.

Christian Narration of Harvey Milk

Although those who constructed representations of Harvey Milk as a martyr and emblem for gay rights may not have been acutely aware of it, the overwhelming majority utilized Christian ideas to frame memory of Milk. I am referring not only to the use of explicit Christian symbols, such as the clothing cross at the GLBT History Museum, but also to the ways, generally, in which Milk’s story has been narrated and depicted. For instance, the documentary *The Times of Harvey Milk*, the opera *Harvey Milk*, and the

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105 Dustin Lance Black admits in *Milk: The Shooting Script* that he fabricated the movie’s scene of Dan White having a conversation with Harvey Milk in church after his son’s baptism so that he could overtly construct White as religious. He writes that, “In order to help draw Dan White’s religious world more vividly, I changed this scene from a baby shower (as it was in real life) to a baptism. I wanted to see Dan’s young family in church.” See Dustin Lance Black, *Milk: The Shooting Script* (New York: Newmarket Press, 2008), 109.
movie *Milk*, all begin with scenes of Milk’s death.\(^\text{106}\) The same is true for his biography *The Mayor of Castro Street* and the stage play *Execution of Justice* about the trial of Milk’s assassin, Dan White.\(^\text{107}\) Such a narrative opening marks death as a defining moment that holds potential for transformation. Death becomes a new genesis. Milk’s murder, however, is not how any of these representations conclude; they all end by pointing toward hope and a better society after Milk’s death. The assassin, therefore, was not victorious. Milk ultimately triumphs. Lives were changed and the gay movement was strengthened because of Milk’s death. In *Foregone Conclusions*, literary scholar, Michael André Bernstein, describes such a narrative move as a distinctly Christian one. The trope of death to redemption, of darkness to light, is a Christian teleological strategy that is imported here to make meaning out of Milk’s murder. Bernstein argues that hegemonic ideas of “history as a linear unfolding from darkness toward light, and from ignorance toward truth”\(^\text{108}\) are symptomatic of the insistence that Christianity superseded Judaism,

\(^{106}\) In his doctoral dissertation, Zachary Adrian Dorsey makes a similar observation about *The Times of Harvey Milk* and the *Harvey Milk* opera, saying that beginning with Milk’s murder is “part of the martyr-making process, pointedly reminding audiences that Harvey Milk’s life and accomplishments are building towards a violent death based on who he was and what he stood for.” See Dorsey, *Embodied Resistance*, 134, footnote 41.

\(^{107}\) I am largely not focusing on *Execution of Justice* in this chapter because the play is about Dan White, Milk’s assassin, and the court proceedings of his trial. Milk is a minor character in the play who mostly appears so the play can open with his murder and so he can be presented as an innocent victim of White’s murder spree. See Emily Mann, *Execution of Justice*, (New York: Theatre Communication Group, 1997).

of Christians moving away from Judaism’s dark, sectarian, legalism, and into the light of universality and possibility. For the early Church fathers, Jesus’ death produced a theological progress narrative, and now, even among pro-gay writers outside of institutional Christianity, death gets figured as a meaning-making site that holds the possibility for a renewed society. This Christianization of history insists that Milk died for a reason, that society will transform, has transformed, because of his sacrificial death. For example, writing twenty years after Milk’s murder in 1998, one essayist for The Advocate says, “Milk’s assassination, as tragic as it was, focused attention on gay politics in a way his supervisorship would not have…Today, more than 150 out gay men and lesbians have been elected to public office.” The writer asserts that Milk’s death produced far greater results for the gay movement than Milk could have accomplished as a living person advocating for gay rights. His murder, not his work as a living activist, was the source and cause of a better country. Gay Americans enjoy an improved world because he died. This specifically Christian approach of insisting that triumph is in death goes back to the first centuries of Christianity. As Judith Perkins writes of one of the primary themes of early Christian martyr narratives, “to die is to win; the wreath is death. Death itself becomes in Christian terms the victory.” In the making of martyrs, then, death is inverted from defeat into triumph. Similarly, through Christian tropes, Milk’s


murder has been figured as a victory, as redemptive for gays and lesbians through the progress produced by his death.

Before proceeding with additional ways in which Christian ideas have shaped representations of Harvey Milk, I should also acknowledge that Judaism has a long history of honoring and commemorating martyrs. In other words, martyrdom is neither absent in Jewish history nor unique to Christianity. Scholars of Jews in antiquity, such as Daniel Boyarin and Israel Jacob Yuval, have argued that Christian and Jewish ideas about martyrdom overlapped and often developed in tandem.\footnote{See Daniel Boyarin, \textit{Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism} (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1999); see also Israel Jacob Yuval, \textit{Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).} Yuval even suggests that Jewish concepts of martyrdom were largely a response to the growing popularity of the Jewish followers of Jesus who had made emulation of Jesus and his death a central facet of their communities. Boyarin further notes that Christian emphasis on martyrdom was facilitated by the Roman state-sponsored Decian Persecution and Great Persecution of the third and fourth centuries that specifically targeted Christians and not Jews. As a result, Boyarin argues that martyrologies with teleological promises of redemption after persecution became an especial focus in Christianity. Although the ancient rabbis of that era also esteemed Jews who elected martyrdom over forced practice of idolatry, by the fourth and fifth centuries, as Vasiliki Limberis highlights, Christians were encouraged to cultivate spiritual friendships with martyrs, to emulate them, and to adhere to the
orthodoxies that they, theoretically, died to uphold.\textsuperscript{112} Christian practice, in many ways, became tied to reverence for the cult of the martyrs. Jews, nevertheless, also continued to remember martyrs, especially those who died during the destruction of the second Temple in 70 CE, as well as martyrs from the revolts against the Syrians in 161 BCE that are described in the apocryphal second book of Maccabees that the holiday of Hanukkah commemorates. New Jewish martyrologies made a prominent return in the Middle Ages when thousands of Jews were murdered during the Crusades. But medieval Jewish martyrrologies adapted, to a large extent, Christian martyr motifs of the dominant European Culture. As Jeremy Cohen writes, “stories of Ashkenazic martyrdom reveal twelfth-century Jews expressing themselves in the idiom of Christian culture.”\textsuperscript{113} In other words, medieval Jews largely composed martyr narratives with tropes that the dominant Christian culture found familiar. In a similar vein, representations of Milk as a martyr and emblem worthy of emulation almost exclusively rely on Christian theological ideas of sacrifice, redemption, and imitation of Jesus.\textsuperscript{114} As gays have sought social acceptance in


\textsuperscript{113} Jeremy Cohen, \textit{Sanctifying the Name of God: Jewish Martyrs and Jewish Memories of the First Crusade} (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 41.

\textsuperscript{114} A possible exception is Lesléa Newman’s short story, “A Letter to Harvey Milk.” The story, however, is not really about Milk. The protagonist is an elderly Holocaust survivor who takes a writing class at his retirement center. As homework he writes a letter to Milk that greatly moves his teacher who comes out as a Jewish lesbian. Christian motifs are not present in this story, and the narrative makes it clear that Milk, like the protagonist and his teacher, was Jewish. Related, the national gay Jewish organization Keshet has a poster series of “LGBT Jewish Heroes.” The posters honor three Jews: Harvey Milk, Lesléa Newman, and transgender activist and writer Kate Bornstein. Of note, Newman and Bornstein are still living, so the poster series does not configure death as the primary source or cause for social transformation. See Lesléa Newman, “A Letter to Harvey
America, Christian teachings and motifs have been used to structure depictions of Milk in ways that fit within the dominant Protestant culture. The erasure of much of Milk’s Jewishness in many representations highlights that his martyrdom has been figured with Christian, not Jewish, concepts.

Just as Jesus’ death is not how his story concludes in the Gospels, none of these popular representations close with a murdered Milk, thereby further emplotting him within a Christian narrative device. For instance, while both The Times of Harvey Milk and Milk begin with Milk’s death, they each end with him delivering the same line: “You gotta give ‘em hope.” In Milk this line is heard immediately after a scene of 30,000 people marching through San Francisco in a candlelight vigil for the murdered Milk and Mayor Moscone. In writing about why he chose to end the movie with a post-murdered, living Milk delivering a declaration of hope, screenwriter Dustin Lance Black says, “I decided to end it where Harvey would have likely ended it, with his message of hope, not violence.”

Thus, rather than portray the 1979 White Night Riots when Milk’s murderer, Dan White, was sentenced to only seven years for manslaughter and five thousand gays and lesbians subsequently set police cars ablaze and destroyed windows of San Francisco City Hall, the movie ends with peace, with a promise for a better tomorrow. The documentary The Times of Harvey Milk does include archival news footage of the White Night Riots. But after showing video of the riots, the movie jumps

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back in time to Milk sermonizing on hope so that neither Milk’s murder nor an angry mob of gays and lesbians concludes his narrative. None of these representations end with cries of how Milk’s death was symptomatic of pervasive disdain for gays. At the time, the White Night rioters chanted, “All-Straight Jury—No Surprise—Dan White Lives—and Harvey Dies!” Milk’s memory as an emblem of hope is, thus, also connected to forgetting such things as the White Night Riots and the anger felt by innumerable gays and lesbians who believed that straight Americans did not care when gays were murdered. Additionally, Randy Shilts reports in The Mayor of Castro Street that the San Francisco police and fire departments raised $100,000 for Dan White’s defense, and that graffiti “soon appeared throughout the city with such slogans as ‘Kill Fags: Dan White for Mayor.’” Although later constructions of Milk present his death as the genesis of a better America for gays and lesbians, the historical record presents a different picture of increased antigay hate.

In minimizing the White Night Riots and in having Milk speak words of hope after his murder and the unjust trial of his assassin, the martyr Milk has been constructed as an advocate for a Christian “turn the other cheek” sensibility, which has likely been presumed to resonate more strongly among the predominantly Christian American audience where Jesus’ call to “love your enemy” is esteemed as the moral exemplar. One could counter my argument here by insisting that Milk repeatedly spoke on the theme of

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117 Shilts, The Mayor of Castro Street, 302.
hope and, therefore, to conclude representations using that topic is not to fabricate what he stood for as a politician or activist. While this is true, it also presumes knowing how Milk would react to his own assassination and to his killer being charged with manslaughter, not murder. In their collection of Milk’s speeches and writings, media scholars Jason Edward Black and Charles E. Morris III even title the final section of their book, “Harvey’s Last Words.” The section, however, only includes Milk’s 1977 “political will” that ends with a declaration of hope and that was recorded a year prior to his death.118 In actuality, Milk’s “last words” were something like, “Oh no,”119 as Dan White aimed a gun at him.120 The “political will” that Black and Morris transcribe for their volume, and that features prominently in various representations of Milk, concludes with what became known as his “hope speech.” The hope speech was developed, revised, and modified with Milk’s speechwriter, Frank Robinson, over a period of more than a year after an opposing candidate told Milk he was too angry and depressing in speeches


119 Quoted in Randy Shilts, The Mayor of Castro Street, 269.

120 I am reminded of scholars who have pointed out that part of the popularity of Anne Frank comes from her imagined last words that, “In spite of everything, I still believe people are good,” which is also a declaration of hope. Those words, of course, were written while Anne was still living in Amsterdam and not after she had been deported to the horrors of a Nazi concentration camp. Her final words and beliefs about people are unknown, even though she is depicted as believing people are good until her last moments. See Jodi Eichler-Levine, Suffer the Little Children: Uses of the Past in Jewish and African American Children’s Literature (New York: New York University Press, 2013); Liora Gubkin, You Shall Tell Your Children: Holocaust Memory in American Passover Ritual (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007); and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Jeffrey Shandler (eds.), Anne Frank Unbound: Media, Imagination, Memory (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012).
and debates.\textsuperscript{121} The basic gist of the hope speech was that a gay teenager, who was always gendered male, had heard of Milk and had been so inspired by him that he phoned just to say that Milk had given him the courage to come out and be openly gay. But as many of Milk’s close friends knew, the boy was mythic. The boy called from Des Moines in early versions of the speech. Other times he was from Dayton. His speechwriter even joked that, “some days the boy lived in Altoona, other times in San Antonio or Buffalo. The boy really got around.”\textsuperscript{122} The hope speech became a way for Milk to construct an influential image of himself in ways that, following the advice of his political opponent, left people with a sense of optimism rather than anger and despair, a strategy that those who have emblemized Milk have also continued to do.

Milk took creative liberties when constructing his own image. For example, he announced in speeches, interviews, and a press release that he had been dishonorably discharged by the US Navy when they found out about his homosexuality. That declaration, however, was not true. As Shilts reports in Milk’s biography, Milk “had not suffered this disgrace [of being dishonorably discharged], he told a later campaign manager, but he knew the story would make good copy.”\textsuperscript{123} Milk might have known gay

\textsuperscript{121} The political opponent was Art Agnos who was running against Milk for a seat in the California State Assembly in 1976. For Agnos’ description of how he convinced Milk that he needed to construct a more optimistic rhetoric, see Dustin Lance Black, \textit{Milk: A Pictorial History of Harvey Milk} (New York: Newmarket Press, 2009), 61.


\textsuperscript{123} Shilts, \textit{The Mayor of Castro Street}, 78.
men who had been dishonorably discharged from the United States military, and he likely wanted to make a point about senseless discrimination against those who had defended the country. But rather than argue such a point, he made himself a symbol of institutionalized gay persecution and lied about how he was discharged from the navy. And in an effort to make a somewhat similar contention, Milk leaked to the press that Oliver “Bill” Sipple, the man responsible for saving President Ford’s life from an assassination attempt in 1975, was gay. Sipple was Milk’s friend and also a marine and Vietnam War veteran. He was not, however, openly gay. Milk felt that straight Americans might change their perceptions of gays if they knew that a gay man was responsible for saving the president’s life. Although Sipple had no intention of declaring that he was gay after he saved the President’s life, Milk went behind his back and leaked the information. Because Milk never confessed what he did to his friend, Sipple sued multiple newspapers for invasion of privacy but lost every case. Sipple’s mother, who did not know that her son was gay, disowned him, and, according to Black and Morris, the outing “traumatized Sipple and his family.” Such a depiction of Milk as a lying manipulator primarily driven by what made politically advantageous news stories is not how representations of Milk are commonly framed. One such problem with the making of martyrs, then, is that they are not mortals, not people who lie, betray loved ones, or act


125 Black and Morris, An Archive of Hope, 135.
selfishly. They are configured as innocents whose deaths are all the more profound because of their imagined virtue and ability to transcend the muddiness of human life.

A final way in which Milk’s Jewishness has been elided, and in which his story has been Christianized, has been through the erasure of Milk’s recurrent rhetoric about how the Holocaust shaped his political activism. Lost entirely in the movie Milk, and most of the documentary The Times of Harvey Milk, is Milk’s emphasis on the Holocaust and his refusal to succumb to a situation similar to that of European Jews.  

For example, in 1978 Milk wrote an article about Anita Bryant’s “Save Our Children” campaign where he declared that, “The bigots waged campaigns of lies and hysteria in every city and there is no reason to believe that they won’t here in California. To hope for something else is to be like Jews in Nazi Germany as they were being loaded into the box cars and hoping they will be treated nicely and not put into ovens.”

Here, Milk blames not only the Nazis for the destruction of German Jewry, but also the Jews themselves for not fighting back. For Milk, fighting was crucial to surviving oppression. As Black and Morris relate, “Milk’s deeper political inclinations may be attributable, by his own accounting, to the 1943 Jewish uprising in the Warsaw ghetto.” Milk idealized those in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising as Jews worthy of emulation. He wanted gay Americans, who he believed were under a similar assault as the Jews of Nazi Europe, to mirror the

126 References to the Holocaust are also completely absent in the musical The Harvey Milk Show.

127 Harvey Milk, “Gay Rights” article draft Coast to Coast, June 16, 1978 quoted in Black and Morris, An Archive of Hope, 213.

128 Black and Morris, An Archive of Hope, 14.
Warsaw Ghetto Jews. Milk implored the gays of San Francisco to fight the Anita Bryants, John Briggs, and other homophobes. And yet the movie Milk, for instance, erases Milk’s rhetoric that connected the Jewish Holocaust to American homophobia so he could serve as a symbol of unity and hope. For example, Milk gave a speech at the 1978 San Francisco Gay Freedom Day celebration to a crowd of about 300,000 people. The scene is reenacted in Milk, but excised from the movie’s version of the speech is Milk shouting, “We are not going to allow our rights to be taken away and then march with bowed heads to the gas chambers. On this anniversary of Stonewall, I ask my gay sisters and brothers to make their commitment to fight. For themselves, for their freedom, for their country.”

Inspired by the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, Milk had no problem advocating for gays and lesbians to fight. He wanted protests. He wanted riots. As opposed to those with “bowed heads” walking into gas chambers, Milk wanted to show straight Americans that gays could be tough, even violent. Similarly, when there were concerns that Proposition 6 was going to pass, thereby making it illegal for gays and lesbians to work as teachers in California, Milk’s friend, Cleve Jones, said to him, “Harvey, I think there’s gonna be riots if this thing passes.” [To which Milk replied,] “There goddamn better be…When are we going to fight back?”

The image of a Harvey Milk who wanted to incite riots is markedly different from how he was constructed in the movie Milk where the screenwriter believed the film should focus on “hope, not violence.” In so doing, the

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130 Milk quoted in a conversation with Cleve Jones recreated in Shilts, The Mayor of Castro Street, 246.
formative role of Jewish history on Milk’s activism was overlooked so that his legacy could be constructed within a nonviolent, Christian, “love your enemy” philosophy.

The Gay M.L.K.

Turning Milk into a symbol of nonviolent activism not only overshadows his emphasis on the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, the Holocaust, and the need for gays to fight, it also connects Milk’s memory and influence to America’s most prominent civil rights leader: the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Beginning almost immediately after his death, and extending into the twenty-first century, gay writers and activists described Milk as, “The Gay M.L.K.” Remove one letter from Milk and the San Francisco city politician is equated with the national civil rights leader. Shortly after he was murdered, Milk’s successor on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, Harry Britt, analogized Milk to Dr. King in the press. The comparison continued. As two simple examples: The first openly-gay elected official in Orange County, California said in 1985 that Milk and King both “represent courage, nonviolence, and commitment to a better future for all mankind.” Notice the emphasis on nonviolence and universal betterment for all people. Similarly, theater scholar John M. Clum wrote in 1996, in an apparent axiomatic declarative, that, “Harvey Milk has become our [gays and lesbians’] Martin Luther King,

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131 See, for example, where this is even the title of an article, Kyle Buchanan, “The Gay M.L.K.,” The Advocate, February 26, 2008, 40-43.


our hero-martyr.”134 By analogizing Milk to Dr. King, however, the Milk-MLK comparison connects the secular Jewish Harvey Milk to a civil rights leader who was deeply influenced by religious ideas, as if Harvey Milk and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had worked from nearly identical principles. King’s tactics were informed by Gandhi’s teachings on nonviolence as a path to peace, as well as by biblical stories of God delivering freedom after slavery. Dr. King also drew much of his inspiration and political ethic from his Christian tradition. His declarations for blacks to “turn the other cheek” to the atrocities committed against them was explicitly influenced by Christian scriptures. With Jesus as his model, King implored black Americans, proclaiming that, “Jesus still cries out in words that echo across the centuries: ‘Love your enemies; bless them that curse you; pray for them that despitefully use you.’ This is what we must live by.”135 Harvey Milk, however, made no such declarations to love those who hate gays, nor did he ever reference Jesus as his model for anything. Milk also did not draw from the Exodus story, a text shared by Jews and Christians, which King referenced regularly as a beacon of hope for the oppressed. Milk is further Christianized, then, by turning him into “the gay MLK,” emphasizing universal hope through Christian teachings of nonviolence. Moreover, the “gay MLK” is an appropriation of Dr. King’s cultural capital, not only erasing the particularly Jewish influences on Milk’s political activism, but also flattening racial inequalities with sexual inequalities as if they are the same.


Another way in which the Milk-MLK comparison is misleading is that it reconstructs Milk into a prominent national leader whose recognition was as great as Dr. King’s fame was during his lifetime. In life, King was a well-known national figure who travelled the country advocating for black civil rights. During Milk’s political career, however, he was primarily a local figure whose popularity was mostly contained to his neighborhood and city. He even dubbed himself “the unofficial mayor of Castro Street,” which rhetorically underscored the periphery of his influence. He was intently focused on winning an election in San Francisco for a seat in their city government. While news stories in other parts of the country periodically ran reports on him, especially when he debated California state senator John Briggs over Proposition 6, he was not a national figure of any great notoriety until his death. Milk’s former editor at the Bay Area Reporter, a San Francisco gay newspaper where Milk had a weekly column, even pointedly declared that, “In his [Milk’s] own lifetime his celebrity was brief and local.” Milk’s national influence as an emblem and spokesperson for gay rights largely occurred in death.

When Milk was alive in the 1970s, gay and lesbian activism did not have a national, unified presence. Activists, like Milk, worked locally and fought for changes within their respective cities and states. But in being murdered, gay advocates were able to use Milk’s death as a way to unify the disparate gay and lesbian activists throughout the country. Historian Edward Linenthal has argued that public grieving allows various

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Americans who would normally feel separated because of race, religion, education, and politics to feel united in a community. Gay activists almost immediately used Harvey Milk’s death for such a goal. Since 1973 gay and lesbian advocates had been trying to organize a national march on Washington for gay rights. In 1978, after yet another unsuccessful attempt to coordinate a march, Harvey Milk volunteered to help orchestrate the efforts. When he died the next volunteers wrote a letter to local gay and lesbian activists throughout the country invoking Milk’s murder as a reason to come together. The pleas to honor Milk nationally and to unite the disparate gay activist groups worked. Eleven months after his death at the first March on Washington for gay rights, nearly 100,000 gays and lesbians marched through the nation’s capital. Whereas gay activism up to that point had been largely coordinated at local levels, *The Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide* marks the 1979 March on Washington as the “symbolic coming out and birth of a national movement for lesbian and gay rights.” Milk’s death was used specifically as a strategic tactic for mobilizing national gay activism and, in turn, Milk’s posthumous popularity exploded. Three years after the March on Washington, *The Mayor of Castro Street* was published and achieved commercial success. In the ensuing decades, Milk was memorialized in multiple books, plays, and films that were intended for national audiences far beyond the borders of San Francisco. Milk was posthumously awarded the

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139 Ibid., 32.
Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Barak Obama in 2009, and in 2014 he became the first openly-gay elected official to be featured on a US postage stamp.

Although in life Milk’s notoriety was mostly contained to California, it would not be hyperbolic to say that, as with Jesus, Milk has had a far more wide-reaching career in death than he had in life.

The Martyred Man: Gender and the Solitary Savior Figure

The recurrent emphasis on expanding Milk’s posthumous repute and on inscribing him as a martyr for the gay movement aligns with how Gail Streete and other scholars of early Christianity argue that martyrs function as “cultural ideals.”140 If one should look to those named as martyrs as emblems of cultural ideals, then one aspect of Milk that is part of the American cultural ideal, and that helps explain his notoriety, is his gender. For example, although countless sources remember Milk as the first openly-gay elected official in the US, he was not.141 That honor goes to Elaine Noble, an out lesbian, who was elected to the Massachusetts House of Representatives in 1974. Three years before Milk won a district election for a city council position, Noble had been elected to a state legislature. Another state legislator, Allan Spear from Minnesota, was so impressed by Noble’s example that he told the press after her election that he was also gay. Why, then,


141 Erroneously describing Milk as the first openly gay elected official occurs in both journalistic reporting and in scholarly work. As an example within academic scholarship, religion scholar Edward Gray incorrectly writes that before he was murdered, Milk was “presiding as the nation’s first and only openly gay elected official.” In actuality, Milk was neither the first nor the only openly gay elected official. See Edward R. Gray, “The Harvey Milk Show: Violence, Desire, and Gay Popular Culture,” in Scott Thumma and Edward R. Gray (eds.), Gay Religion (New York: AltaMira Press, 2004), 327.
has Milk received much more attention than Noble? For one, Milk died less than a year into the job just after spearheading the defeat of Proposition 6 and is, therefore, remembered as a winner. In contrast, those who live, like Noble, have careers that fluctuate. After two terms in the Massachusetts State Assembly, Noble ran for the US Senate and lost. Martyrs, however, do not fail, so Milk is remembered as the hero who paved the way, overshadowing the actual first openly-gay elected official. In Christian martyrrial logic, death functions as a site of hope for a better future. Power, therefore, has been enshrined in the man who died, not the trailblazing woman who lives.

The ongoing focus on Milk over lesbian contributions to gay history underscores long-lasting sexism within the gay movement. Although Milk is esteemed as a martyr for the gay and lesbian movement, the archives of his speeches, writings, and interviews do not suggest that he was particularly interested in lesbian issues or concerns. Instead, he spoke and wrote with passion about attending to “victimless crimes” that targeted the gay community. Victimless crimes, such as arrests for cruising and raids in bathhouses and gay bars, almost entirely concerned gay and bisexual men. And with the exception of Anne Kronenberg who joined Milk’s staff during his last campaign, the overwhelming majority of Milk’s volunteers were gay men. As Shilt’s reports in Milk’s biography, “As was the case in virtually all of Milk’s campaigns, Harvey drew little support from lesbians who distrusted his alliances with drag queens and also noted that Harvey had

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142 See, for example, Harvey Milk, “Where There is No Victim, There is No Crime,” Press Release, April 1, 1974 printed in Black and Morris (eds.) An Archive of Hope, 100-101.
few, if any, close lesbian friends.”143 The concern with drag queens and the dearth of lesbian friends is partly indicative of a pre-AIDS historical setting when lesbians and gay men did not interact much. Drag queens were seen as mocking women without accounting for the many oppressions they face. And, as Gayle Rubin, John D’Emilio, and others have observed about the 1970s, male sexism within gay activist circles contributed to lesbians forming their own organizations.144

Milk seemed far more impressed with his own campaigns than he was with Elaine Noble’s political victory, and Milk, himself, may be partially responsible for initiating the erasure of Noble’s trailblazing election from public memory. For example, when giving a speech in Dallas in June 1978, Milk recounted what he considered were monumental historical milestones, one of which was his own election, saying that, “In 1977 a gay person was elected to public office in California.”145 He situated his own election as a turning point in American history, never mentioning Elaine Noble as the country’s first openly-gay elected official. Similarly, on the night that Milk won an election, after three failed attempts, he compared himself not to Noble and her path-breaking work, but to Jackie Robinson, the first black major league baseball player.146 Milk’s refusal to mention

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143 Shilts, The Mayor of Castro Street, 103.


or honor Noble was likely because he felt snubbed by her. Noble had endorsed another candidate during Milk’s third campaign when he ran for California State Assembly. Milk was enraged and could not comprehend why a lesbian would endorse a straight candidate over a gay one. In an interview that Milk later gave with a radio show based in Massachusetts, he said:

Elaine Noble, you were wrong. [She was not present for the interview.] You were rotten to come here 3,000 miles to get involved against a gay person for a straight person. We don’t need ‘friends’ to help the gay movement. We can do it ourselves. You don’t find blacks any longer electing ‘friends’ of the black community. You find blacks electing blacks. You find Latinos electing Latinos. You find Asians electing Asians. If Elaine Noble doesn’t understand that, it tells me she’s either dumb or she was using the gay movement for her own personal reasons.¹⁴⁷

Here, Milk not only ridiculed Noble, he also reduced her to one of two sexist stereotypes about women: dumb or cunningly manipulative. Milk’s language in this interview, to briefly return to an earlier observation, hardly resonated with a “love your enemy” approach, nor did the interview or his other self-promoting claims do anything to bridge the divide between lesbians and gay men that persisted until the coming of AIDS in the 1980s.

Elaine Noble has been almost entirely erased in most representations of Milk that have emblemized him as a martyr for the gay movement. She is completely missing in the movie Milk, the documentary The Times of Harvey Milk, the opera Harvey Milk, and countless other re-creations, such as the musical The Harvey Milk Show. All of these

¹⁴⁷ This quote comes from the transcription of the radio interview from 1978 on the program Closet Space in Vince Emery (ed.), The Harvey Milk Interviews: In His Own Words, (San Francisco: Vince Emery Productions, 2012), 157.
representations were created by gay men who have found ways to elevate Milk while ignoring Noble. In the movie *Milk*, for example, a staffer says to Milk that with the creation of district elections in San Francisco, “You are going to be the first openly-gay man elected to a major office in the United States.”148 The statement is true only because the word “man” is used instead of “candidate” or “American.” But since Noble is never mentioned, nor is Milk ever presented as the second openly-gay candidate to win an election, Noble’s memory as a pioneer and trailblazer for gays and lesbians is erased. Noble, however, is not the only lesbian who has been commonly excised in martyrrial representations of Harvey Milk. Sally Gearhart, a professor who partnered with Milk to debate John Briggs and defeat Proposition 6, has also been regularly expunged from depictions of Milk. Gearhart was the first out lesbian in a tenure-track academic position in California where she was also an activist for gay and lesbian rights. Milk teamed up with Gearhart to debate John Briggs in an array of public settings throughout the summer of 1978. A clip of one of their debates is featured in *The Times of Harvey Milk*. When the debates were recreated for the movie *Milk*, however, the film depicts only Milk going up against Briggs. Gearhart’s image and assistance are entirely overlooked. Milk, in turn, is imagined as the great American man who took on enemies by himself. In this narrative, Milk alone had the vision, bravery, and eloquence to lead a movement in opposition to the antigay Proposition 6. Unfortunately, as with most martyr stories, the myth is greater than the man. And representations that exclude Noble, Gearhart, and other women

148 *Milk*, directed by Gus Van Sant (2008; Los Angeles, CA: Universal Studios, 2009), DVD.
reinscribe a gender hierarchy pervasive in American society, and in gay and lesbian history, so that Milk, alone, is remembered as the gay savior figure.149

Polyamorous in Life, Domesticated in Death: Depicting Milk’s Sexuality

Even though Milk has been upheld as a gay martyr, his sexuality, as much as his Jewishness, is another crucial area in which Milk has been Christianized by those who have constructed images of him. Since the Times of Harvey Milk in 1984, Milk’s sexuality has been presented as fitting within Protestant sexual ideals of monogamous relationships based on long-term commitment and the relegation of sex to the private sphere of the home. Although he promoted polyamory in life, Milk has been posthumously assimilated into an American Protestant sexual ethos that demands acceptable, civilized citizens to contain their sexuality to coupled, domesticated, monogamy if they are to obtain social acceptance and rights.

The most robust portrayal of Milk’s sexual and romantic relationships are found in the biography The Mayor of Castro Street. Written in 1981 and published in early 1982, The Mayor of Castro Street was composed at a time shortly before the sexual mores of gay men, and perhaps the entire country, changed significantly. Milk lived in San Francisco when sex with multiple partners, for gay men especially, was common. The AIDS crisis, however, changed the feasibility of such a carefree attitude toward sex. AIDS also altered the ways in which gay men presented their own sexual lives to the straight American populace who largely viewed gay men as responsible for spreading a

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149 While creating composite characters and erasing representations of supporting figures is not necessarily atypical in films or in narrative constructions of so-called great men, a narrow understanding of LGBT history is reified when the contributions of many others, especially lesbians, is overshadowed by embellishing Milk’s influence.
plague through sex, sin, and licentiousness. Milk’s biographer, Randy Shilts, writes that in the Castro district of San Francisco in the 1970s, “Promiscuity was practically an article of faith [for gay men]…This proved particularly fortuitous for Harvey, whose sexual appetite never waned.”\textsuperscript{150} Here, Shilts describes a setting where, especially in gay urban enclaves like the Castro, sex with multiple partners during any given week was normal and acceptable. The bathhouses, bars, and cruising areas facilitated finding sex with ease, and Milk was no exception to this sexual culture and practice. Additionally, Milk maintained multiple romantic relationships at the same time, periodically having three or four concurrent boyfriends. According to Shilts, Milk promoted a theory of “neo-homosexual romance,”\textsuperscript{151} where gay liberation meant breaking free from the life scripts of coupled monogamy taught by straights. Shilts quotes Milk as saying:

\begin{quote}
We grew up with the heterosexual model, but we don’t have to follow it. We should be developing our own life-style. There’s no reason why you can’t love more than one person at a time. You don’t have to love them all the same. You love some less, love some more—and always be honest with everybody about where you’re at. They in turn can do the same thing and it can open up a bigger sphere.\textsuperscript{152}
\end{quote}

Milk believed that intimacy with more than one person was not only possible, but an ideal way to cultivate an expansive community of connectedness. For Milk, gay liberation was about creating new possibilities for inhabiting the world that did not rely on what heterosexuals had prescribed for everyone.

\textsuperscript{150} Shilts, \textit{The Mayor of Castro Street}, 88.

\textsuperscript{151} Ibid., 237.

\textsuperscript{152} Ibid., 237-238.
The depiction of Milk as sexually free, involved in multiple concurrent relationships, and opposed to the hegemony of monogamous coupling, completely changes by the 1984 documentary *The Times of Harvey Milk*. The film entirely elides Milk’s active and non-monogamous adult sex life. Rather than mention Milk’s multiple boyfriends during his five years in San Francisco or anything about his vibrant sex life, the documentary’s narrator simply says that Milk and his lover moved to San Francisco and “settled down.”\(^{153}\) The narration of Milk settling down is the only glimpse the documentary provides of Milk’s romantic or sexual life. Never mind that Milk’s version of settling down included sex with others outside of that relationship, or that he and that boyfriend, Scott Smith, separated a few years later; the documentary leaves only the image of them as a domesticated couple. While the documentary’s focus is, arguably, on Milk’s political life and not his sexual life, the film still strategically constructs Milk as a man who, romantically and sexually, “settled down” with one person.

Significantly, much had changed in the few years between *The Mayor of Castro Street* and *The Times of Harvey Milk* that could help explain such an elision of Milk’s sexual practices. By the documentary’s release in 1984 more than 5,000 Americans, most of them gay men, had died from AIDS complications. Additionally, and importantly, by 1984 bathhouses were facing government-imposed shutdown as gays were increasingly blamed for spreading the disease through sexual promiscuity. Given the antigay vitriol surrounding AIDS throughout the 1980s, the documentarians potentially thought it best to construct a Harvey Milk who would better fit within American bourgeois standards of

respectability, domestication, and romantic coupling by having him be “settled down” with just one person. Indeed, one possible explanation for the enduring popularity of using Milk as a martyr and emblem for gay rights is that straight Americans could more readily accept Milk as an innocent victim who was murdered in cold blood, as opposed to the thousands dead from AIDS who were, in skewed logic, responsible for their deaths because of their sex lives.

More than 270,000 Americans had died from AIDS by the premiere of the Harvey Milk opera in January 1995, and debates over whether or not bathhouses should be closed were a relic of the 1980s. In addition to continued efforts for better AIDS treatment, gay activism in the 1990s shifted tremendous energy and attention to same-sex marriage as a movement priority. Gone were the days of gay liberation groups fighting for the dissolution of state involvement in marriage. Instead, gays increasingly presented themselves as interested in and capable of long-term, coupled, monogamous relationships. The Harvey Milk opera premiered in this setting, a year and a half before the Defense of Marriage Act was signed into federal law when both gay activists and the religious right were increasingly preoccupied with the possibility of same-sex marriage.

Where The Times of Harvey Milk eschews dealing with Milk’s sex life, the Harvey Milk opera emphasizes a plot of romantic monogamy as one of its primary themes. Just as the opera fabricates Milk’s presence at the Stonewall riots, the opera also

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fictionalizes his romantic life. In fact, the Stonewall riots function as the major turning point in the show that creates the possibility for gay romantic coupling. Early in the opera Milk gets arrested in Central Park when other men were cruising for sex. This is the dark past that Milk must liberate, where anonymous sex with strangers is symptomatic of gay oppression. Cruising for sex ceases to exist in the Harvey Milk opera after the scene of the Stonewall rebellion. Similarly, in another early scene before Stonewall, Milk walks into his apartment, which is actually a closet, and is greeted by three pre-Stonewall boyfriends who are chained together. The symbolism is obvious: before Milk led a revolution, all gay relationships were basically the same in that they were condemned to a suffocating life of hiding and secrecy. After Milk fights in the triumphant Stonewall revolt, the romantic plot of the show comes to fruition as Milk and his new boyfriend, Scott Smith, walk together into the light. As the show continues, no mention is made of Milk seeking out sex or love with anyone other than Smith. Instead, the opera puts especial emphasis on Milk and Smith as a domesticated couple deeply in love and committed to each other. In real life, Milk and Smith not only had an open relationship, they also separated a few years after they moved to San Francisco. The Harvey Milk opera, however, never depicts the dissolution of their relationship. Moreover, the opera not only omits details about Milk’s sexual and romantic life, it also fabricates situations to further present Milk as a monogamous man. For example, when Milk is sworn in to office, he says, “Thank you, Mayor Moscone, and thank you, San Francisco. Thank you to the Castro! My lover, Scott!”\textsuperscript{155} In actuality, Milk and Scott Smith had long separated.

before his inauguration, and a new boyfriend, Jack Lira, accompanied Milk to his
swearing in to the Board of Supervisors. But the opera leaves audiences with the
impression that had Milk not been murdered, he and Smith would still be together living
like a happily married, monogamous couple.

By the 2008 motion picture *Milk*, same-sex marriage had become the most visible
priority for gay and lesbian activism in the United States. In 2003 Massachusetts became
the first state to recognize same-sex marriages, and in the same year the US Supreme
Court ruled in *Lawrence v. Texas* that sodomy laws were unconstitutional. While gay and
lesbian activists during this time were also involved in enacting hate crimes legislation,
employment non-discrimination laws, and the eradication of the military’s Don’t Ask,
Don’t Tell policy, same-sex marriage had become a clear goal for many gay advocates at
both the state and federal level. *Milk* debuted in this milieu, and his constructed image
hardly transgresses acceptable ideas of romantic coupling that could complicate
arguments for same-sex marriage. For instance, in a scene where Milk is preparing for his
second campaign, he says that he is giving up bathhouses and pot. In life, Milk might
have given up both bathhouses and marijuana, but the movie fails to mention that
throughout that same time he was in non-monogamous relationships where he happily
had sex with many others outside of bathhouses. The movie, thus, gives the impression
that Milk transcended the more socially taboo side of gay male sexuality, that he rejected
unbridled sexual frivolity and chose commitment to one person. Milk’s declaration that
he was giving up bathhouses and pot is also in *The Mayor of Castro Street*, but in the
biography it is followed with Milk saying, “I decided this [running for public office] was
all too important to have it get wrecked because of smoking a joint or being in a raid at
In other words, Milk’s concern was in no way related to focusing on fidelity. He wanted to ensure that he would not get arrested while running for political office. And although the movie does show Milk and Scott Smith end their relationship, the film nevertheless portrays Milk as dating only one other man who eventually moves in with him. No mention is made of Milk falling in love with others concurrently, nor are there depictions of him pursuing sex with multiple men during the time of his next relationship.

Several scholars of both Christian and Jewish martyrdom have written that martyr representations tend to reveal more about the composers of such narratives than they do about actual historical figures. Jeremy Cohen, for example, writes that, “while tales of martyrdom, then, perhaps can teach us something about the martyrs themselves, their ideas, and their deaths, they communicate considerably more about the martyrrologists, those who remember the martyrs and tell their stories because they find them meaningful.”

Put differently, representations of Milk that valorize him as a timeless emblem reveal potentially more about those who create such narratives and their political agendas than they do about the Harvey Milk who lived from 1930-1978. For instance, the screenwriter of Milk, Dustin Lance Black, is a vocal and active proponent of same-sex marriage legislation. As one example, he published an essay in the San Francisco Chronicle imploring President Obama to support federal same-sex marriage legislation.

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156 Harvey Milk quoted in Shilts, The Mayor of Castro Street, 80.

157 Jeremy Cohen, Sanctifying the Name of God: Jewish Martyrs and Jewish Memories of the First Crusade (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), viii, original emphasis.
while also insisting that Milk’s struggles were germane to the twenty-first century.158 Similarly, The Advocate reported that Black hoped his movie would generate momentum for more people “to work toward marriage equality.”159 Harvey Milk, however, never addressed the topic of gay marriage. He did not bring it up once in speeches, interviews, or in his writings. In a 2008 article in The Advocate—a sort of “What Would Harvey Do?”—his friends imagined how Milk would react to the push for same-sex marriage. Cleve Jones answered by saying, “Much of what he [Milk] did and believed was informed by the gay liberation movement. In those days we neither needed nor wanted the state to sanction our relationships.”160 In other words, and as mentioned earlier, Milk was interested in dismantling prescribed romantic and familial formations. Milk believed the gay movement could liberate everyone from the narrow confines of coupled marriage as the only legitimate way of inhabiting the adult world. He lived at a time when gay and lesbian activists circulated such ideas as viable options for avoiding assimilation to the patriarchal and antigay society run by straights. As one example, in 1972 the National Coalition of Gay Organizations lobbied for the “repeal of all legislative provisions that restrict the sex or number of persons entering into a marriage unit.”161 This gay liberation


group wanted the privileges that were restricted to coupled, monogamous, married heterosexuals to be extended to all other cohabiting persons regardless of the gender or number of those involved. But this revolutionary approach to upending American marriage faded as an increasing number of gay and lesbian activists focused on obtaining legally recognized dyad marriages.¹⁶²

In order to construct Harvey Milk as a timeless emblem for gay advocacy, Milk has been stripped of his 1970s gay liberationist ideals and his active sex life. He has been constructed as someone who fits within late twentieth and early twenty-first century ideals of domesticated, monogamous gay couples. As feminist scholar, Rachel Bowlby, has written, domestication should be understood according to the original French, *domestiquer*, or bringing the presumed “primitive or alien into line with the ‘domestic’ civilization and power, just as a ‘domesticated’ animal is one that has been tamed into home life.”¹⁶³ In other words, to domesticate is to compel someone, or a group, into the norms of the dominant society. In these representations of Milk, he has been turned into a domesticated gay man who fits well within normative arguments for marriage equality. As Michael Warner has demonstrated, depicting gays as capable of monogamous marriage has been a strategic effort to show the dominant straight society that gays are respectable and worthy of rights.¹⁶⁴ Just as ancient martyr tales were created to defend the

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¹⁶² I will explore the historical shift to focusing on marriage as a gay activist priority in chapters three and four, which focus on AIDS and Matthew Shepard respectively.


beliefs and teachings of those who composed such stories, narratives about Milk have
been used to support changing strategies for gay rights. Milk, the gay liberationist in life,
has become a respectable gay assimilationist in death.

Compelling groups to comport to the dominant sexual ideals of the US in order to
be regarded as legitimate Americans has a long history. Dustin Lance Black, the
screenwriter of Milk, may even be aware of how white, mainline Protestant Christianity
has shaped the acceptable sexual ethos of the United States. Raised in a Mormon family,
Black likely knows that promoting non-monogamous relationships has not been well
received in arguments for marriage rights or for being regarded as lawful citizens. The
contentious history of Utah becoming a state, for example, was wrapped up in a forceful
Protestant lobby that insisted on not only codifying polygamy as illegal, but also on
actively prosecuting known polygamists before Utah could be accepted into the union.165
Quite simply, Mormons could not be considered acceptable American citizens until the
leaders of Utah disavowed and criminalized polygamy. Native Americans were similarly
expected to abandon their traditional kinship formations and to become “civilized”
through Protestant sexual norms of monogamous marriage that relegated sex to the
private sphere of the domestic home. American literature scholar, Mark Rifkin, for
example, argues that the history of “U.S. imperialism against native peoples over the past

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165 For a detailed discussion of the connection between Utah criminalizing polygamy and
becoming a state, see Gaines M. Foster, Moral Reconstruction: Christian Lobbyists and
the Federal Legislation of Morality, 1865-1920 (Chapel Hill: The University of North
two centuries can be understood as an effort to make them ‘straight,’” by which he means restricting the number of genders to simply male and female and to insisting that sex only take place in committed, married, domestic settings. To be “civilized” in America, thus, is always connected to adhering to the sexual norms of Protestant Christianity. Indeed, part of the long history of anti-Catholic bias and nativism in the US stems from suspicions of Catholics, and especially Catholic leaders, as sex deviants. True Christians, and true Americans, according to this Protestant thinking, get married—monogamously.

In the Protestant American sexual ethos, monogamous marriage has become the only way to ensure the containment of what might otherwise be unbridled sexuality. As Mark Jordan writes, “Polygamy has been an exegetical crux for Christian theology. It has also been continuously imagined as a necessary boundary on the other side of which stood heretical Christians or nefarious non-Christians.” In other words, sexuality and sexual practices have long functioned as an imagined dividing line separating authentic Christians from heretics. In the United States where Protestants totaled nearly ninety-five percent of the non-Native population until 1880 and had two centuries to establish a profoundly Protestant culture, Protestant sexual ideals have been a marker of who counts

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167 For a discussion of how anti-Catholic bias in the US is connected to Protestant sexual mores, see, for example, Marie Griffith, *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 25-31 especially.

as acceptable Americans. Christians like the Oneida Perfectionists, who engaged in “complex marriage” that involved multi-partner sexual relations, were not only derided by other American Christians as heretics but were also demonized with intense vitriol as threats to the American state. As Marie Griffith writes, “those who have sought to establish innovations in orthodox Protestant heterosexuality have so often faced vehement opposition, persecution, and even criminalization.” To promote polyamory not only places one outside the boundaries of normative Protestant Christianity, it concurrently jeopardizes one’s place as an acceptable American because of Protestantism’s hegemonic shaping of appropriate American sexual practices and subjects. Therefore, Mark Jordan also argues that, “Good politics now requires that gay men hide nonexclusive or multipartner relationships from public view for the success of the movement.” Here, Jordan suggests that because of the long American history of connecting legal and social recognition to monogamous marriage, gay men who do not want to endanger the gay movement’s current efforts must hide romantic and sexual relationships that do not map well onto Protestant sexual ideals. Harvey Milk’s sex life and ideas about loving multiple men at the same time do not fit within the Protestant

169 Although he does not address Protestant sexual discourse, William Hutchison provides an excellent description of how mainline Protestant Christianity has shaped and maintained the ethos of the United States. See William Hutchison, Religious Pluralism in America: The Contentious History of a Founding Ideal (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).


sexual ethos, and would, therefore, place him outside the boundaries of what has historically constituted acceptable American citizenry.\footnote{172} To make Milk into an acceptable American, his sexual practices and his arguments about creating relationships with multiple partners have been gradually erased from public memory. Representations of Milk that idealize him as a timeless emblem for gay rights have, thus, configured Milk as someone who fits well within the parameters of the Protestant sexual ethos where sexuality can, theoretically, be contained.

Concluding Thoughts

Why does it matter that Harvey Milk is less Jewish, less sexual, less radical, less angry, and, generally, less queer in death than he was in life? For one, as numerous scholars of martyrdom have illustrated, martyrs inculcate ideas about what is appropriate and ideal. By eliding Milk’s Jewishness, his emphasis on gays fighting, and his polyamorous sex life, the martyr Milk conveys a message that to be an acceptable gay

\footnote{172} Milk’s ideas about polyamorous “neo-homosexual romance” would also place him outside the boundaries of Jewish sexual norms. But as scholars such as Riv-Ellen Prell have argued, marriage has been a key site in which Jews have been expected to adhere to Protestant norms, especially marital gender roles where Jewish women were primarily expected to be relegated to the private sphere of the home and men to the public sphere of commerce. Prell writes that young Jewish female immigrants and their daughters were regarded as sexually suspect until they married and took on the attributes common to those of white Protestant women. Moreover, my emphasis here is to point out how Milk has been turned into an acceptable citizen, which has largely been determined by Protestant, not Jewish, norms. See Riv-Ellen Prell, \textit{Fighting to Become Americans: Assimilation and the Trouble Between Jewish Women and Jewish Men} (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999). For more on Jewish attitudes on sex and sexual practices, see David Biale, \textit{Eros and the Jews: From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). For more on Jewish proscriptions against same-sex relationships, see Rebecca Alpert, \textit{Like Bread on the Seder Plate: Jewish Lesbians and the Transformation of Tradition} (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).
American is to comport as closely as possible to Protestant norms. Rather than fighting to undo the rigid expectations of a straight culture significantly shaped by Protestantism, Milk has been refashioned into someone who assimilates to bourgeois respectability and domestication. As Mark Jordan relates, in American gay advocacy since the 1970s, “The well-dressed picketers in cardigans have come closest to success,”\textsuperscript{173} underscoring the idea that in the history of US gay social acceptance, those who have been most successful are the ones who represent assimilation to the white middle-class. Milk’s image, therefore, has been transformed so that he better resembles the changing tactics of gay assimilationist activism.

The continual push to memorialize Milk underscores Erika Doss’s argument that memorials typically celebrate who counts as “the ‘good’ citizen.”\textsuperscript{174} Consequently, the recurrent emphasis on Milk—the white, educated, middle-class man—signifies who matters in gay and lesbian history. The persistent focus on Milk contributes to forgetting lesbians like Elaine Noble, as well as all of the gays and lesbians of color who also formed many of their own organizations in the 1970s because of frustrations that gay activism was dominated by white men like Milk. In fact, Milk’s ability to blend in with the white American mainstream may help explain part of his appeal both in death and in life. His ex-boyfriend, Scott Smith, said that, “For a lot of straight people, he [Milk] was the first nonstereotypical gay person they had ever met. Harvey was just like everybody


\textsuperscript{174} Erika Doss, \textit{Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 56.
That Milk appeared “just like everybody else” seems to indicate that he already looked the part of someone in America who should have cultural capital, except for being gay and Jewish. He was an educated white man who, by his second campaign, almost always sported a suit, a symbol of masculine respectability. And since Milk’s Jewishness reinforced that he was already marginal to the dominant white Protestant society, his Jewish identity was downplayed in many representations so that the focus was primarily placed on how, aside from being gay, he was similar to the dominant group and, therefore, apparently deserving of equal rights.

In structuring representations of Milk around Christian motifs, in death, as with Jesus, Milk’s Jewishness faded so that a Christian story of redemptive sacrifice could be told. Dustin Lance Black, the screenwriter of 2008’s Milk, for example, believes that, “Harvey taught us that from our darkest hour comes ‘Hope.’” This Christian teleological reading insists that progress comes out of degradation and that suffering has a purpose. One could resist such a redemptive Christianization of history by suggesting, instead, that horrible historical moments are just that, and not indicative of teleological promises. In all of his rhetoric about the Holocaust, I have found no indication that Milk believed hope was found in the gas chambers or that Jewish possibilities flourished because so many European Jews died. But in becoming a gay martyr, the Jewish and sexually-uninhibited Harvey Milk has been Christianized, which in American history has been a common tactic for civilizing would-be citizens.

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175 Scott Smith quoted in Dustin Lance Black, Milk: A Pictorial History of Harvey Milk (New York: Newmarket Press, 2009), 46.
CHAPTER 3

AN INTERLUDE (OF MASS GAY DEATH): AIDS AND MARTYRDOM

One of the earliest panels created for the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, the largest AIDS memorial in America, carries the name John Booth and displays twelve red candles. Only three candles on the panel bear a flame; the remaining nine have been extinguished. On the reverse side, the panel’s maker explains that the candles represent his close friends, the “12 men I expected to grow old with, nine who have passed on and three who will join them soon.”176 To have twelve friends is a gift. To have twelve friends become sick and die from the same mysterious disease in a short period of time is a horror. By the first unveiling of the AIDS Memorial Quilt in 1987, nine years after Harvey Milk’s murder, nearly 46,000 Americans, about two-thirds of whom were gay men, had died from AIDS complications in just six years. In urban centers like New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, groups of gay male friends were decimated. Although the AIDS Memorial Quilt raised awareness of the massive death toll, eight more years would pass until medicines made HIV, the retrovirus that causes AIDS, treatable as a chronic, not deadly, condition. By that point, at the start of 1996, more than 300,000 Americans had died from AIDS.177


This chapter is an interlude in my study of American gay martyrdom. Although discourses of martyrdom were present during the first fifteen years of the AIDS epidemic, AIDS martyrs, for the most part, were not gay—an especially curious phenomenon given that AIDS was commonly understood as a gay disease. While other chapters in this project address specific figures who were widely described as martyrs, a specific gay martyr figure, or gay martyr collective, was not prevalent during the American AIDS epidemic. “AIDS martyrs” were typically heterosexuals or children with AIDS. One function of this chapter, then, is to understand why gay martyr rhetoric was not more common during the AIDS epidemic, and to examine what the paucity of gay martyrdom exposes about the place of gays in America in the years between Harvey Milk and Matthew Shepard’s deaths. A secondary function of this chapter is to build up to, and help make sense of, the widely-described martyrdom of Matthew Shepard in 1998. As chapter four will elucidate, Matthew Shepard’s murder evoked a greater outpouring of outrage than any other gay death in United States history. To understand Shepard’s vast appeal among straight Americans who had never before concerned themselves with gay politics requires an examination of the years leading up to his murder when the mass death of gay men evoked a far less vocal, or angry, response. The present interlude chapter is, thus, a cultural history of the first fifteen years of the AIDS epidemic that strives to answer one specific question: given that discourses of martyrdom were prevalent during the American AIDS epidemic, and since gay activists used martyr rhetoric before and after the AIDS crisis, why were gay men, the group initially hardest hit by AIDS, not regularly regarded as martyrs by mainstream media or by gay activists?
The chapter is structured with five focal areas that are meant, collectively, to answer the chapter’s central question about martyrdom and gay Americans during the first fifteen years of the AIDS epidemic. The first section will provide a historical overview of AIDS within and in relation to gay communities. I do not want to reinscribe AIDS as a gay disease, but I am limiting my analysis to how AIDS affected gays in the United States because this study is principally focused on American gay social acceptance. I have turned to the archives of gay newspapers and magazines, memoirs, and mainstream news publications. I hope to illuminate the confusion, suffering, despair, traumas, internal contestations, and external antagonisms during the first fifteen years of the epidemic to give a sense of the place of gays in America at that time. Second, I will linger for a bit on 1985, the fourth year of the epidemic, when the test for HIV became available after 18,000 Americans had already died, when actor Rock Hudson’s AIDS diagnosis became public, and when the most-widely invoked AIDS martyr – child

I am focusing on the first fifteen years of the epidemic, 1981-1996, because 1996 marks the first year when the number of AIDS deaths in America declined. This change resulted from a new combination of drugs, Highly Active Antiretroviral Treatment (HAART), which made HIV undetectable in people who were able to adhere to the regimen. For those with access to healthcare and financial resources, HAART changed HIV from a deadly disease into a chronic illness that, for many, could be managed.

I should also add that my focus here on “gays” and AIDS is on gay men. I will use the term “lesbians” specifically when I intend to group them with, or separate them from, gay men’s experiences with AIDS. While the disease was constructed as a “gay cancer,” lesbians were not nearly as directly affected by HIV/AIDS. They were, however, understood for a brief period as having contaminated blood. Lesbians also served in many activist and caretaking roles throughout the epidemic in spite of the pervasiveness of sexism within the gay movement leading up to, and through, the onset of AIDS. For a lengthier discussion of lesbian involvement in AIDS activism, see Ann Cvetkovich, An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).
hemophiliac Ryan White – captivated national headlines. I focus on Hudson and White not only because they received extensive media coverage, but also because Hudson was vilified by many within the media while White was sainted. Ryan White’s martyrdom proved instructional for gay advocates, and, in turn, I will discuss him in both this and the chapter on Matthew Shepard. Third, I will briefly explore the use of Holocaust rhetoric during the AIDS epidemic, specifically in relation to the activist group ACT UP.

Analogizing gay AIDS deaths to the Holocaust proliferated after the 1986 Supreme Court case *Bowers v. Hardwick* where the Court ruled that sodomy laws were constitutional. The government’s declaration that gays could be arrested in their own homes coupled with calls to quarantine people with AIDS fueled forms of AIDS activism that were notably angry and that employed genocidal references. I focus on the use of Holocaust rhetoric because it exposes a belief among many gay AIDS activists that the American government, throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, was content with the deadly eradication of gay men from the country. Fourth, I will focus on the one specific aspect of AIDS history where gay men were regarded as martyrs: the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt. I will analyze how the Quilt configured gay deaths as martyrs and examine the reasons why the Quilt achieved widespread popularity among mainstream media and straight Americans. I will also explore two representations of gay men with AIDS that achieved mainstream popularity: the film *Philadelphia* and the play *Angels in America*. My analysis of these popular representations is to understand the ideologies they satisfied, promoted, or subverted that contributed to their mainstream popularity. I also include these representations because both present fictional protagonists who, although not named as martyrs, function well within tropes of martyrdom and, therefore,
provide an indication of what was necessary for acceptable late twentieth-century gay martyr figures. Fifth and finally, I will explore efforts that became prevalent in the mid-1990s within gay politics that read AIDS within a teleological supersessionist narrative where the gay sexual cultures of the 1970s were portrayed as the dark past that gays had to discard in order to awaken to the light of monogamous marriage as the proper way to be accepted as American citizens. Although in other chapters I foreground and make explicit claims about Christian ideas influencing secular gay advocacy, that tactic became far more common in the 1990s and later. In the last two sections of this chapter, though, I will highlight how unmarked Christian ideas influenced appeals for gay assimilation in relation to AIDS activism.

As this chapter will illustrate, the paucity of gay martyr rhetoric during the American AIDS epidemic exposes that gay men were generally held responsible for their own suffering and deaths from AIDS by dominant straight society and by a vocal portion of gay communities. Gay men with AIDS were not regularly regarded as innocent victims; instead, they were commonly depicted as promiscuous hedonists. Such a description of gay men was not exclusively germane to the religious right. The lack of martyr discourses within gay communities was also resultant from internal debates about sexual freedom, gay liberation, and the construction of sexual institutions in the 1970s that some gay men believed led to mass death. Internal debates within gay communities about sexual promiscuity coupled with persistent external condemnation of homosexuality did not facilitate the exaltation of gay men with AIDS as martyrs worthy of empathy or emulation. Instead, the blond, Protestant, Midwestern, white, hemophiliac, teenager, Ryan White, became the most commonly-invoked AIDS martyr. White was
revered as a martyr, in part, because he was already included within America’s mainstream, and because, as a pubescent hemophiliac, sex was disentangled from his AIDS diagnosis. In turn, subsequent representations of gay men with AIDS that evoked the greatest mainstream media attention, such as the AIDS Memorial Quilt and the film *Philadelphia*, sanitized and downplayed gay male sexuality and polyamory. The AIDS Quilt, the one AIDS memorial to name gays as martyrs, and productions like *Philadelphia* and *Angels in America*, reveal what constituted acceptable gay martyrs and, concomitantly, acceptable late twentieth-century gay citizens. As a result, gay male sexual cultures and institutions of the 1970s and early 1980s were largely eradicated not only by AIDS, but also by assimilatory demands that prescribed the Protestant sexual ethos of coupled, domesticated, monogamy as necessary for American citizenship and for gay social inclusion.

**AIDS in American Gay Communities**

The standard historical narration of the American AIDS epidemic begins with a June 1981 Centers for Disease Control (CDC) newsletter that contained a report about five gay men in Los Angeles who had been diagnosed with a dangerous and remarkably rare form of pneumonia, Pneumocystis carinii (PCP). The only factor the men shared, other than their pneumonia diagnosis, was that they were gay. The CDC’s report, thus, set the stage for Americans to understand AIDS as a gay disease. Within months, doctors across the country similarly diagnosed gay men with PCP and with Kaposi’s sarcoma.

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(KS), a form of skin cancer that produces large lesions on all parts of the body. Doctors and researchers had not yet connected middle-class gay men with PCP and KS to intravenous-drug users who had presented similar symptoms since the mid-1970s. The prevalence of PCP in IV-drug users had become so common that it was nicknamed “junkie pneumonia.”¹⁸¹ But when otherwise healthy and young gay men with access to healthcare started to develop rare diseases and die quickly, the CDC took notice. I offer this not to suggest that the CDC managed the crisis well once it was observed in gay men, but to highlight that, in relation to AIDS, the American populace was always hierarchized. As 1981 progressed, both gay and mainstream publications printed reports of a new “gay cancer.”¹⁸² Still flummoxed as to why gay men were becoming gravely ill with diseases rarely seen in young people, the CDC labeled what would eventually be named AIDS as the Gay-Related Immune Deficiency Syndrome (GRID). In New York City where the prevalence of sick gay men was becoming an increased concern, a group came together in 1981 to form the Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC) in an effort to disseminate what little information was known and to lobby politicians, the CDC, and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to devote research funds to the mysterious illness.

By 1982 the CDC noted that although gay men made up the vast majority of cases of the new disease, others were also affected. They identified four “risk factors”: male homosexuality, IV-drug use, hemophilia, and immigration from Haiti. Since gay men were not the only ones affected, the CDC renamed the illness the Acquired Immune

¹⁸¹ See, for example, Cathy Cohen, The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 126.

¹⁸² See, for example, Lawrence Altman, “Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals,” New York Times (New York, NY), July 3, 1981.
Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) in 1982. The focus on “syndrome” in the naming reflects how those lumped together as having AIDS got sick and died from a range of diseases, or opportunistic infections. Moreover, the CDC’s “risk factors” constituted the next hierarchy in AIDS history, largely leaving straight, white, non-IV-drug using Americans without concern for developing the illness. But in 1983 the CDC warned that AIDS could be transmitted through blood. The National Hemophilia Foundation subsequently lobbied to exclude “by direct questioning individuals who belong to groups at high risk for transmitting AIDS, specifically male homosexuals; intravenous drug users, and those who have recently resided in Haiti.”\(^\text{183}\) The American Red Cross followed these recommendations, thereby becoming the first group to target for exclusion those who were perceived as more likely to develop AIDS. All gay and bisexual men, for example, were barred from donating to – or, perhaps as it was more properly understood, from contaminating – the American blood supply. The Red Cross also initially recommended that lesbians refrain from donating blood, a sanction suggesting that all homosexuals were regarded as responsible for polluting the nation with a plague.\(^\text{184}\) As the 1980s progressed, AIDS and one’s place in America became increasingly tenuous. By 1987 the United States federal government prohibited anyone with AIDS or HIV, the retrovirus by that time believed to cause AIDS, from entering, much less immigrating to, the United


\(^{184}\) The recommendation for lesbians to refrain from donating blood lasted until 1983 in the US, but the debate continued in the UK through, at least, 1986. For a lengthier discussion, see Deborah Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP’s Fight Against AIDS* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 66.
States. The US government, thus, actualized the exclusion of people with AIDS from America’s borders.

AIDS hit America at a moment in US history when the religious right had achieved visible political power and popularity by speaking out against homosexuality. As discussed in chapter two, starting with Anita Bryant’s “Save Our Children” campaign in 1977, gays and lesbians faced ongoing attacks across the country as politicians and conservative Christians labeled them as pedophiles who “recruit” adolescents to homosexuality. Additionally, throughout the late 1970s, evangelical and conservative Christians expressed recurrent disapproval of President Carter, the first born-again American president, for his unwillingness to take on homosexuality or abortion as political issues. But when Ronald Reagan emerged as the republican frontrunner for president, what he lacked in an evangelical background, he made up for through his professed vow to restore America’s commitment to family values. The Moral Majority and other sizeable religious right groups, such as Focus on the Family, endorsed Reagan and forged a long-lasting link between Republican Party politics and purported conservative Christian values. Within this context when AIDS began to ravage gay communities, gay men reentered the national consciousness as diseased, dying, and carrying the stigma of a plague. In turn, AIDS became a conduit, an acceptable public excuse, for the religious right to condemn homosexuality and unbridled sexual freedoms. As religion scholar, Anthony Petro, writes, “The AIDS epidemic provided a site to elaborate the Christian Right’s political positions, as the appearance of a virus afflicting mostly gay men provided proof of the moral superiority of ‘traditional values’ and the need for Americans to scale back the freedoms granted through the ‘sexual
The religious right had already gained political clout by espousing disdain for homosexuals. The AIDS epidemic offered evidence that they had been correct all along. The Reverends Jerry Falwell and Billy Graham were among many conservative Protestant leaders to cast AIDS as both divine punishment against gays and against America for allowing homosexuality to supposedly flourish. The growing religious right, thus, gave meaning to AIDS deaths by explaining them through a framework of sin and divine judgment.

Conservative Christian leaders were hardly the only Americans embracing negative attitudes about homosexuality in the 1980s. In fact, AIDS appeared to have increased hostility toward gays. Studies indicate that between 1980 and 1987 the number of Americans who viewed homosexuality as “always wrong” increased from 73% to 78%. When gay men were at their sickest, dying from a mysterious disease with no cure or hope for treatment, gays learned how much they were reviled by their country and their families. AIDS, after all, was the condition of an immune system so weak that it could not fight off typically benign bacteria and viruses. People with AIDS served as


hosts to innumerable diseases and parasites. Their bodies were ravaged by debilitating fevers, their bowels and brains betrayed them, they could be covered in lesions, go blind, lose astonishing amounts of weight, and develop dementia. For many urban gay men, the horrifying specter of AIDS sickness and death hovered constantly for fifteen years, and the religious right, and many straight Americans, explained the plague as punishment for the sin of homosexuality. Coupled with this public condemnation of homosexuality was a feeling expressed by many gay writers that mainstream journalists were mostly silent about AIDS and did not care that gay men were dying. Writer Paul Monette notes in his memoir that, “It was often remarked acidly in West Hollywood that if AIDS had struck boy scouts first rather than gay men, or St. Louis rather than Kinshasa [the Congo], it would have been covered like a nuclear war.” Here, Monette expresses his not uncommon belief that the lives, and deaths, of gay men were of little interest to mainstream news publications, and that if AIDS had first appeared among Midwestern straight children, America’s desire to see information printed about the epidemic would have been dramatically different. AIDS, in other words, exposed which lives mattered to the nation.

One of the traumas visited on gay men during the first several years of the AIDS epidemic was that no one knew how the disease was spread. Men would get sick and have no idea why. Nor would they know if a particularly bad cold was just that or a sign that they would be dead within months. But since AIDS was first understood as a gay disease, many within and outside of gay communities turned to gay male sexual

behaviors to determine how the disease spread. The gay urban migration of the 1970s had facilitated not only the creation of gay neighborhoods, but also the establishment of a flourishing gay sexual culture. In addition to the proliferation of gay newspapers, community centers, bookstores, performance spaces, and bars, an array of institutions designed specifically for men to have sex with one another also appeared in many US cities. These venues grew out of gay liberation and the sexual revolution. Their supporters shared with feminism a critique of marriage and monogamy as flawed systems that promoted heterosexual patriarchy and capitalism through the ownership of another person. As an example of this perspective that was discussed in chapter two, Harvey Milk, writing in the 1970s, promoted “neo-homosexual romance,” which involved loving more than one person at a time. Milk, like others, believed that communities would be strengthened if people were in multiple romantic and sexual relationships because of the ways in which polyamory could forge communal and kinship relationships. For many other gays in the 1970s and early 1980s, sex with multiple partners did not need to be tidied up by connecting it to an ethic of community. Rather, sex was pleasurable and should be enjoyed in as many ways as possible.

With the emergence of AIDS, internal debates erupted within gay communities about the role of sexual freedom, commonly presented as “promiscuity,” in killing gay men. In November 1982 the *New York Native*, the gay newspaper in New York City that

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189 As I elucidate in chapter two, Milk’s practice of and belief in polyamory has largely been erased from public memory, in part, because of the legacy of AIDS and the resultant shift in gay politics so that he could be upheld as someone who would have fought for gay marriage.
most frequently addressed AIDS, published a provocative essay that best articulated the
position that gay men were responsible for their own deaths because of their sex lives.
Insisting that all theories about AIDS as caused by a not-yet identified virus were
incorrect, the essay’s authors declared that they “have concluded that there is no mutant
virus and there will be no vaccine. We veterans of the circuit must accept that we have
overloaded our immune systems with common viruses and other sexually transmitted
infections. Our lifestyle has created the present epidemic of AIDS among gay men.”\textsuperscript{190} In
other words, AIDS was the body’s reaction to having too many sexual partners who had
each introduced viruses and bacteria that, collectively, the immune system could not
handle. Supporting such a perspective, the editor of the national gay and lesbian
magazine, \textit{The Advocate}, admonished that, “Whether we like it or not, the fact is that
aspects of the urban gay lifestyle we have created in the last decade are hazardous to our
health. The evidence is overwhelming.”\textsuperscript{191} Both of these arguments illustrate a belief
prominent within gay communities that gay men had brought death upon themselves
through uninhibited sexual freedom. Such a perspective provides one early indication of
why gay activists did not refer to those dead from AIDS as martyrs.

Internal debates about gay male promiscuity throughout the AIDS epidemic
reveals that a stigma against unbridled sexual frivolity and venereal diseases persisted
within gay communities. If martyrs are meant to be innocents, then the religious right was
not the only group asserting that gay men bore some responsibility for their deaths; many,

\textsuperscript{190} Richard Berkowitz and Michael Callen, “We Know Who We Are: Two Gay Men

though hardly all, gay men also felt that they had invited their demise through limitless sexual freedom. As historian Brad Gregory illustrates, martyrs are commonly used for propaganda, to bolster public perception of a persecuted group.\textsuperscript{192} The debates about promiscuity that began as early as 1982 and that remained prevalent throughout the remainder of the AIDS epidemic reveal that gay men had no consensus about exalting their dead as representative innocents who should be emulated.\textsuperscript{193}

One product of the debates about sexual freedom in gay communities was the introduction of “safe sex” as an idea and practice. Safe sex first entered gay communities, and by extension all of America, not through public health officials or medical researchers, but by a group of men dressed in drag as nuns. The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, an organization of gay men who wear habits and who take vows to “promote universal joy and expiate stigmatic guilt” began in San Francisco in 1979. Orders of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence gradually spread to eight countries. Operating outside of the official Church hierarchy, the Sisters strive to remove the taint of sin and guilt associated with sex. Using idioms of Christianity, the Sisters refuse to allow the Vatican final authority, expressing a particularly queer Christian theology of communal unification and joy through sexual freedom. As fear of AIDS spread through San Francisco’s gay community, the Sisters designed one of the first safe-sex brochures in 1982 entitled \textit{Play Fair!} The pamphlet humorously presented tips for remaining sexually

\textsuperscript{192} See Brad Gregory, \textit{Salvation at the Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 176 especially.

\textsuperscript{193} Deborah Gould notes in her history of ACT UP that debates about sexual freedom predate AIDS, but that “AIDS intensified them.” See Gould, \textit{Moving Politics}, 72.
healthy. For example, one section read, “Mother Superior’s Recommendations to Help Create a Disease-Free Convent and Community…Condoms: If you have a sore on your cock that looks suspicious and you simply must indulge, wear a condom. Don’t give whatever you might have to your partner(s).” Condom use had not been prevalent among gay men before AIDS because condoms were primarily understood as birth control. The warning to look for a “sore on your cock” as evidence that one should wear a condom reveals that semen was not yet identified as a source of AIDS. The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence distributed their safe sex pamphlets in bathhouses and sex clubs, the places where gay men were likely to congregate for “communion” and even more likely to need a queer “catechism” on safe sex education. By the next year as public health officials prescribed abstinence and monogamy to avoid AIDS, which meant nothing since there was no test to determine who was already infected in a relationship, more gay men produced materials on safe sex. In New York two gay men with AIDS created the popular pamphlet, “How to Have Sex in an Epidemic,” which both promoted condom use and, in forty pages, encouraged men to engage in myriad sexual practices that did not involve the exchange of bodily fluids. Activist and scholar Douglas Crimp

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195 Throughout the chapter I will use the language that is present in the archives, even when it is slang, rather than convert that language to standard technical terms. I do this to highlight how gay men, in contrast to the scientific or public health fields, were creating safe sex techniques and educational materials that reflected gay men’s sex lives and the ways they discussed sex.

reflects that, “We were able to invent safe sex because we had always known that sex is not, in an epidemic or not, limited to penetrative sex. Our promiscuity taught us many things, not only about the pleasures of sex, but about the great multiplicity of those pleasures.”\(^\text{197}\) Crimp illuminates the perspective that it was the sexual institutions and the sexual cultures that gay men had created in their communities that allowed them to respond to AIDS in ways that saved lives. As medical research was slow to identify the cause of AIDS, gay men, within their sexual cultures of bathhouses and sex clubs, promoted ways of managing the crisis that allowed them to live as sexual beings and to quickly disseminate information to those who needed it most.

Although bathhouses had been crucial spheres for exploring safer sex possibilities and for notifying men about how to remain healthy, local government officials in cities such as San Francisco and New York insisted that the best approach to combating the spread of AIDS was to close the baths. The initiative to condemn bathhouses caused significant upheaval and disagreement within gay communities between 1984 and 1985. Many gay men, including Harvey Milk’s biographer Randy Shilts, joined with public health officials in campaigning for the government to shut down the bathhouses as a way to ameliorate further spread of AIDS. For Shilts, the government needed to close the baths because he believed men could not control their sexual urges. Reflecting a narrow perspective of male and female sexuality, Shilts insisted that, “in an all-male subculture there was nobody to say ‘no’—no moderating role like that a woman plays in the

heterosexual milieu.” Since gay men, according to this logic, did not have to contend with the stereotypical frigid woman to refuse sex, Shilts lobbied for the government to serve such a role, to force men to stop having sex whenever and however they wanted it. Such a position put those gays in the company of legislators like Newt Gingrich who publicly advocated for the government to close the bathhouses rather than to distribute safe sex materials. As activist Eric Rofes wrote in the gay political magazine *Out/Look*:

> The most visible internal community battles during the mid-1980s focused on health officials’ often successful attempts to close or crack down on places of communal sexual activity…Mainstream lesbian and gay community activists considered these spaces embarrassments, obstacles to their attempts to assimilate…and to prove that ‘gays are no different than straights.’

The shift among activists to argue that “gays are no different than straights” represents a radical break from earlier forms of gay liberation politics. By the mid-1980s, under the shadow of plague, gay communities faced blame for the disease killing them, while they also hoped to appeal to the government to do more for AIDS research. Many gay men and lesbians, therefore, argued that it was better to let institutions like the baths get destroyed so that political energies could be focused elsewhere. Yet many others, both gay men and lesbians, protested the government’s intervention into their sex lives. In 1984, for example, hundreds of mostly gay men, and some lesbians, protested the anticipated closure of bathhouses with signs that read, “Today the Tubs, Tomorrow Your

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199 For a discussion of Gingrich’s arguments about closing the baths see Petro, *After the Wrath of God*, 124.

"Bedroom," underscoring a belief that closing the bathhouses was not about public health but about censuring gay sex. But by 1985 local authorities closed all bathhouses in San Francisco and New York. At the same time, as feminist scholar Gayle Rubin highlights, police in those cities prioritized arresting gay and bisexual men for cruising in public areas like parks and restrooms.

In many ways, gay bathhouses and public sex venues became sites for the state, under the banner of public health, to enforce the Protestant sexual ethos of married, heterosexual, coupled monogamy through criminalization and institutional eradication. As Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini write, “The secular state’s interest in regulating sexuality is an interest in maintaining religious – specifically Christian – authority.”

Under the guise of “public health,” the American secular state criminalized group sex, codified it as taboo, and as contributing to spreading a plague. In turn, under the auspices of secular government agencies, the American Protestant sexual ethos of married, domesticated, coupled, monogamy was reinscribed as necessary for the health of the nation. As Anthony Petro similarly argues, “[T]hrough the AIDS epidemic, Christian moral assumptions regarding sexuality were elaborated by, attached to, and translated into broader political and public health discourses.”

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gay liberation had allowed for expansive sexual freedoms, closing the bathhouses offered a way for the state, and the many Protestant leaders eager to assert “traditional family values,” to reaffirm the Protestant sexual ethos as not only ideal, but as necessary for America’s wellbeing. Group sex spaces, however, were not responsible for the spread of AIDS; a virus transmitted in specific ways caused AIDS to spread. Yet, the state circumscribed non-monogamous group sexual relations as taboo, deadly, and, in some instances, criminal. Gay communities, in turn, learned that arguing for public sex venues and polyamory hindered legal recognition, greater rights, and, for those who wanted it, social integration.

1985 and the Rise of the AIDS Martyr

As bathhouses faced government shutdown in 1985, the first test to detect HIV, the retrovirus most researchers believed responsible for causing AIDS, was licensed for use in the general public. The Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) had been discovered in late 1983 and named in 1984 when the international scientific community largely agreed that it was responsible for causing AIDS.\(^{205}\) In 1985 researchers developed the ELISA test to determine if a person had developed antibodies for HIV, thereby indicating a person’s status as either HIV positive or negative. Gay communities, for the most part, did not immediately celebrate the news of a test for HIV. For one, no treatments had been developed to extend the life of people with HIV or AIDS, so a

\(^{205}\) For a lengthy discussion about the discovery of the retrovirus, debates about who could claim credit for its discovery, and how that debate delayed public knowledge about the retrovirus, see Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1987).
positive diagnosis merely verified a painful and debilitating death with virtually no hope for a cure. Additionally, HIV was one of countless theories that had been presented to gay communities as the cause of AIDS. Even though scientists were adamant that HIV was the primary cause of AIDS, public health officials had also been certain that sex with too many partners in bathhouses contributed to AIDS. The CDC had also previously questioned if poppers, an inhalant drug common among gay men, were responsible for AIDS. And there had been theories that AIDS was from mutant strains of hepatitis or syphilis. The *Play Fair!* brochure, for example, using the standard recommendations in 1982, warned gay men to avoid “rimming” because it was believed to be the practice that made one most susceptible to AIDS.

The stream of warnings and retractions about which sexual practices were or were not safe led many to have suspicions about HIV as the singular cause of AIDS. Writing four years after the introduction of the HIV test, playwright, novelist, and AIDS activist, Larry Kramer, demurred that, “I won’t dwell on the possibility that troubles me and a few others: that HIV is not the only cause of AIDS, that it’s possible it isn’t, that there’s a cofactor, or an additional cause, or additional causes.” Four years after the HIV test was introduced, Kramer still had suspicions that AIDS was caused by more than just HIV. He was not alone. The same year AIDS activist Martin Delaney, acknowledging common skepticism about HIV, published an essay in *The Advocate* encouraging all gay

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men to accept HIV as the cause of AIDS and to be tested for antibodies. The toll of these fears is revealing. For one, Kramer explained how, for him, every act of sex—from kissing to using condoms—was entangled with fear of death. Reliable information about AIDS had been absent for so many years that he became frightened of all aspects of sex. Others, like Douglas Crimp, lamented that “alongside the dismal toll of death, what many of us have lost is a culture of sexual possibility.” In other words, gay men were not only grieving the tremendous loss of their friends and lovers; they were also losing their ability to experience pleasure and bodily connection.

The HIV test introduced a new hierarchy into gay communities in 1985: negatives and positives. To be HIV positive was to carry the stigma of contagion, plague, and death. But, as writer Andrew Holleran also makes clear, to be negative during the AIDS epidemic also carried its own distressing concerns. He writes that, “such men [who tested negative] had their own problems: survivors’ guilt, withdrawal, and depression. Negative and negative, uninfected and pessimistic.” By the time a test for HIV became available, gay men were living with an onslaught of traumas, from proximity to death, caring for others, guilt for not getting sick, and fear that all gay sex was already contaminated with disease. And yet, and perhaps primarily, the HIV test was not met

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with a warm reception among gay communities for one more important reason: gay men were frightened of being labeled by the government as having AIDS. As Paul Monette questioned about the HIV test, “What if somebody started keeping a list? Lists were the first step to protective isolation, the polite terms for camps.” Monette’s question hardly proved rhetorical. Although AIDS activists lobbied for anonymous HIV testing, many state governments passed legislation mandating health officials to keep records of those who tested positive. 1985 may have been the year when the HIV test became readily available, but it was also the year when the straight American populace worried in ways far greater than ever before that they too could be at risk for AIDS.

Fear that AIDS had spread to the “general population” of straight Americans was, in large part, connected to the vast media attention produced by Rock Hudson’s public disclosure of an AIDS diagnosis in July 1985. Hudson was a popular actor, and friend of Ronald and Nancy Reagan, with a long list of television and film credits where he had developed a reputation for bringing the quintessential qualities of the masculine, handsome, all-American man to the screen. News that the all-American man had AIDS rattled a public that largely associated AIDS with gays and drug addicts. People magazine ran a story about Hudson a month after the disclosure of his AIDS diagnosis that included quotes from Hudson’s friends who reported knowing that he was gay. Hudson, therefore, was one of many men outed by AIDS. The idea that leading man Rock Hudson was gay provoked widespread debate about homosexuality and AIDS

212 Monette, Borrowed Time, 149.

transmission. Journalist Frank Rich wrote that in “1985 we had to accept the fact that many of our fundamental, conventional images of heterosexuality were instilled in us (and not for the first time) by a homosexual.”

Hudson’s AIDS disclosure raised more attention for AIDS than any other singular event since the initial appearance of the disease four years earlier. One article in the Chicago Tribune, for example, noted that Hudson’s “disclosure was praised widely as courageous. By giving AIDS a face—the square-jawed face of one of Hollywood’s last classically romantic men—he intensified public, political and scientific interest in the incurable disease.” In this regard, Hudson presented America with the idea that a beloved figure, a quintessential American man, had been susceptible to AIDS. But panic soon spread as Hudson’s AIDS diagnosis ignited fears that he was one of many men who had pretended to be straight. If Rock Hudson had been gay, then perhaps any man could be gay and a transmitter of HIV/AIDS. In December 1985 People magazine ran a follow-up story on the national media coverage that erupted after they outed Hudson, writing that, “Death, in short, has not been kind to the ex-postman from Winnetka, Ill. It has transformed him from the most reticent into the most famous homosexual. It has questioned his honor when he is no longer able to defend it.” Hudson’s image, in other words, went from that of a beloved star to a dishonest homosexual. As media scholar,

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Marita Sturken, explains, “Hudson was perceived as perpetrating a betrayal…his complex public image did not reduce the correlation of AIDS with sexual deviancy. Indeed, it may have acted to shift the association of the epidemic with gay (deviant) sexuality to simply deviant sexuality and the threat of the bisexual man.”

Rock Hudson did not become a gay AIDS patient who elicited overwhelmingly productive sympathy from straight Americans. He was depicted not as a gay martyr, but as a liar. And if he had lied, countless other closeted men could similarly be putting their wives and girlfriends at risk for AIDS. The summer that Hudson went public with his AIDS diagnosis, *LIFE* magazine’s cover was emblazoned with a blood-red headline that read, “NOW NO ONE IS SAFE FROM AIDS.”

As national mainstream media finally focused sustained attention on AIDS, gay men were once again vilified. Rather than producing activism for gay men and others devastated by AIDS, straight Americans worried about how they had been put in danger. One of the paradoxes, then, of American AIDS history was that there was both vocal, vitriolic condemnation of gays from the earliest days of the epidemic, but also, up until 1985, silence from mainstream media and the federal government about how the epidemic wreaked havoc on gay communities. Related, one of the many criticisms President Regan faced from AIDS activists was that he did not utter the word “AIDS” publicly during his first term, even as gay men were getting sick and dying at alarming rates. In response, President Reagan’s assistant, Gary Bauer, said in an interview on *Face the Nation* that neither the President nor his Administration had

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addressed AIDS until 1985 because, “It hadn’t spread into the general population yet.”

In the 1980s, then, the mass death of gay men was not worthy of empathetic attention from the country’s highest political leaders.

The greatest outpouring of public sympathy for an American with AIDS was not for Hudson or any gay man, but for teenage hemophiliac Ryan White. As religion scholars Janet Jakobsen, Ann Pellegrini, Mark Jordan, and Anthony Petro have already highlighted, White was constructed as an innocent victim undeserving of HIV who became the AIDS epidemic’s “most famous martyr.” White was a blond, Midwestern, Christian adolescent who was diagnosed with AIDS in December 1984 soon after he turned thirteen. As a hemophiliac, White contracted HIV from a blood transfusion, not from sex, and especially not from gay sex. White started to feel better in the spring of 1985 and decided to return to school. But the school administrators, joined by teachers and parents, banned him out of a fear of contagion. His mother sued, and the case made White a national name. As opposed to Hudson who provoked debate, and as opposed to the thousands of dead gay men and IV-drug users who mostly elicited silence, the American public rallied in White’s support. Celebrities befriended him, he testified before a presidential commission, Republicans met with him to discuss AIDS treatments, the media ran countless stories about him, he published a (ghost written) memoir, charities were named after him, ABC produced a television movie about him, and


America’s largest federally funded program for people with HIV/AIDS was named the Ryan White CARE Act. When he died in 1990 CNN broadcast his funeral so that all Americans could participate in mourning “the boy with AIDS.” First Lady Barbra Bush attended the service and Elton John performed.

The vast amount of positive attention given to Ryan White exposes, as religion scholar Mark Jordan succinctly writes, “that the problem really wasn’t AIDS after all. It was gay men. Once AIDS is put into a straight teenager’s body, it can be accepted—even by a Republican First Lady.” Where gay men had elicited scorn or silence, the white, male, Midwestern, Protestant youth elicited compassion and a countrywide commitment to fight AIDS. The boy from America’s heartland was a victim. Gay men, on the other hand, were not understood as victims; they had gay sex (and perhaps lots of it), and so they had no innocence. While White garnered increased attention for AIDS, that attention primarily helped fuel the emergent discourse of “innocent victims,” a moniker for people with AIDS who were neither gay nor drug-users. White’s “martyrdom,” therefore,


222 The discourse of “innocent victims” primarily applied to those who developed AIDS from blood transfusions or children who contracted AIDS from their mothers during birth or from breast milk. Examples of people with AIDS who were labeled as “innocent victims” include Arthur Ashe, the first black professional tennis player to win a grand slam tournament who received a blood transfusion during heart surgery, and Elizabeth Glaser, wife of a television star who received a blood transfusion after hemorrhaging during child birth. Another widely-described innocent victim and “AIDS martyr” was Sister Romana Marie Ryan, a nun and kindergarten teacher who was infected through a blood transfusion. See, for example, Janet Huck, “Breaking a Silence: ‘Starsky’ Star, Wife Share Their Family’s Painful Battle Against AIDS,” Los Angeles Times (Los Angeles, CA), Aug. 25, 1989. See also Diane Winston, “Heterosexual Martyrs and Gay Saints: Did AIDS Coverage Clear the Way for LGBT Equality?” ReligionDispatches.com, last modified July 16, 2012,
reified a binary of those who deserved AIDS and those who did not. His notoriety, thus, did not help gay men with AIDS achieve greater social recognition. As scholar of Christian martyrdom, Gail Strete, writes, “Martyrs suffer and usually die as outsiders to dominant cultural or political hierarchies that cannot tolerate them, but also serve as upholders of new, different, or resistant cultural norms.” In White’s case, he was an outsider in that he had AIDS. But his martyrdom only upheld new “cultural norms” related to AIDS where sex was made invisible. The barely pubescent youth with hemophilia was presumed not to have contracted HIV from sex, which apparently made him worthy of sympathy and admiration. Like most martyrs, White was presented as unjustly persecuted. The teenager who had done nothing wrong was turned away from his school. But gay men who had been turned away from hospitals because medical staff would not touch them, and by funeral directors who would not handle their bodies after they were already dead, mostly aroused outrage within gay newspapers, not from mainstream media.224 One reason, then, that martyr rhetoric did not proliferate for gay men with AIDS was because every gay man with AIDS was always associated with sex. The most visible gay martyr after Harvey Milk would not emerge until two years after the American AIDS epidemic ended. And that martyr, the gay death that prompted vigils,


224 As an exception where a mainstream newspaper ran a report of “a practice that has angered advocates for people with AIDS” on funeral homes that either refused people with AIDS or charged extra to deal with them, see Sharon Bass, “Funeral Homes Accused of Bias on AIDS,” New York Times (New York, NY), Nov. 15, 1987.
clergy-led prayers, protests, and riots in more than sixty cities often with thousands in attendance at each, shared many similarities with Ryan White. In the 5’2,” 105-pound college student Matthew Shepard, the gay movement had a small, white, blond, male, Protestant acolyte who evoked the attention of straight Americans who had been largely ambivalent or apathetic to the plight of (sexualized) gay men throughout the AIDS epidemic. As I explore in chapter four, Matthew Shepard became the Ryan White of the gay movement, the youthful gay martyr who garnered vast national attention among straight Americans and mainstream media.

Anger Activism: Stopping the Homosexuals’ Holocaust

A year after Ryan White first captivated national headlines, the United States Supreme Court ruled in the 1986 case *Bowers v. Hardwick* that state anti-sodomy laws were constitutional, meaning that gay men and lesbians could be arrested for engaging in consensual sex in their own homes in the 21 states where sodomy laws existed. The case resulted from the 1982 arrest of Michael Hardwick in Georgia. An arrest warrant had been issued for Hardwick when he failed to show up for a court date after he received a citation for public intoxication. Police were dispatched to Hardwick’s Atlanta home to arrest him, and Hardwick’s roommate allowed the police to enter the premises. Hardwick was in his bedroom engaging in oral sex with another man when a police officer entered his room. The officer subsequently arrested both men for violation of Georgia’s sodomy laws, which prohibited oral and anal intercourse. The charges were ultimately dropped, but Hardwick sued and the case reached the US Supreme Court in 1986. In a 5-4 decision, the Supreme Court upheld Georgia’s anti-sodomy laws. Writing for the majority decision, Chief Justice Warren Earl Burger explained, “In constitutional terms
there is no such thing as a fundamental right to commit homosexual sodomy…

Condemnation of those practices is firmly rooted in Judeo-Christian moral and ethical standards…To hold that the act of homosexual sodomy is somehow protected as a fundamental right would be to cast aside millennia of moral teachings.”

Not only had gay sex been criminalized and outlawed in public sex venues during the AIDS epidemic, the US Supreme Court also ruled that all gay sex, even in the private sphere of one’s home, was criminal in the 21 states where sodomy laws existed. The Chief Justice cited “Judeo-Christian” teachings to substantiate the decision that same-sex sexual activity was never permissible—anywhere. The editor of New York City’s *Big Apple Dyke News* responded to the decision by declaring that the Supreme Court “took away gay people’s right to even be in the closet in the privacy of their own bedrooms. When they took away our closet, they really took away our right to exist at all.”

The *Bowers* case made visible what supporters of keeping the bathhouses open had warned: “Today the Tubs, Tomorrow Your Bedroom.” According to the highest arbiters of American law, to engage in consensual gay sex was to be a criminal, a legal and social outcast. The *Bowers* decision provoked outrage in gay and lesbian communities across the country. Thousands angrily demonstrated in San Francisco and New York, and *The Advocate* printed an editorial entitled, “The Time for Gay Rage is Now!”

In analyzing the impact of the

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Bowers case, sociologist, Deborah Gould, writes that Bowers made clear to American gays and lesbians that, “If the government and society saw homosexual sex and love (and thus homosexual lives) as criminal, they certainly would not suddenly become concerned about homosexual deaths.”228 In other words, mass gay death had not mattered to the nation because gay lives were not understood as having value.229 Consequently, as the AIDS death toll reached nearly forty thousand, many gay AIDS activists took the Bowers case, and straight American’s apathy about AIDS, as a sign that genocide was occurring.

By 1987 anger about AIDS and the place of gays and lesbians in America exploded within New York City’s gay community as the nation continued to show little concern for what was appearing to some as the insidious eradication of gay men from the country. Larry Kramer, founder of the Gay Men’s Health Crisis, had been publishing essays in the New York Native that were reprinted in gay newspapers across the country insisting that AIDS was a form of genocide. As an example from a 1989 essay, Kramer asserted that, “It’s not too early to see AIDS as the homosexuals’ holocaust. I have come reluctantly to believe that genocide is occurring: that we are witnessing—or not witnessing—the systematic, planned annihilation of some by others with the avowed purpose of eradicating an undesirable portion of the population.”230 Kramer was often quick to tell readers that AIDS was not the same as the Final Solution, that the treatment

228 Gould, Moving Politics, 141.

229 For more on how who gets mourned reveals who matters, see Judith Butler, Undoing Gender (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1-16 especially.

230 Larry Kramer, Reports from the Holocaust, 263, original emphasis.
of gays in America was not analogous to that of the Jews of Europe, but that gay men were dying rapidly because of a government that hated them and a public that was content as bystanders. Kramer’s fears of eradication were shared by many others.

Prominent AIDS activist Greg Bordowitz said that, “We were very scared the Reagan administration was going to put people with AIDS in internment camps.” The concern over internment camps was connected to the HIV antibody test and legislation passed in several states that required documentation of those who tested positive. In 1986 the New York Times published an essay by William Buckley, editor of the National Review, where he argued that the government should mandate tattooing for HIV-positive people to easily identify them. Buckley was not espousing a unique perspective. The Los Angeles Times conducted polls in 1985 and 1987 asking more than 2,000 people if they supported tattooing people with HIV/AIDS. In 1985 15% of respondents agreed, and in 1987 the percentage rose to 29%. The survey’s administrators further reported that 50% of Americans favored quarantining people with AIDS and that 48% believed people with AIDS should carry special identification at all times. Similarly, in 1986 California voters were asked to determine if people with AIDS should be placed in quarantine

231 Greg Bordowitz quoted in United in Anger: A History of ACT UP, directed by Jim Hubbard (2012), DVD.


camps in order to reduce the spread of AIDS. While the proposition was defeated, two
million Californians voted in favor of the AIDS internment referendum.\footnote{234}

In this setting where discussions of quarantining people with AIDS were
prevalent, the civil disobedience group ACT UP (the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power)
formed in New York in 1987. While numerous AIDS activist groups were established
throughout the 1980s, historian Michael Bronksi writes that “ACT UP was the most
effective political action group the LGBT movement had ever produced.”\footnote{235} ACT UP
formed after Larry Kramer gave an impassioned speech at New York’s Gay and Lesbian
Center calling on gays to fight back against the gay genocide. The following week 300
people gathered for ACT UP’s first meeting, which not only grew within New York but
spread to 147 chapters throughout the world.\footnote{236}

ACT UP repeatedly invoked the Holocaust as central to their message. At the
New York City gay pride parade in 1987, ACT UP’s first float was of a concentration
camp filled with HIV positive people, thereby making the comparison between calls for
quarantining and genocide explicit. From ACT UP’s perspective, government mandates
to restrict rights (as in the Bowers decision), to require AIDS identification (as in several

\footnote{234} For a discussion of this proposition, initially designed by Lyndon LaRouche, see

\footnote{235} Michael Bronski, A Queer History of the United States (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012),
232.

\footnote{236} For an extensive history of ACT UP, see Deborah Gould, Moving Politics: Emotion
and ACT UP’s Fight Against AIDS (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). For a
discussion of the role of lesbians within ACT UP, see Ann Cvetkovitch, An Archive of
Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures (Durham: Duke University
states’ decisions to catalogue HIV positive people), and to force internment (as in calls for quarantining) were genocidal strategies with precedence in Nazi Germany. In turn, ACT UP used a pink triangle as its emblem to remind Americans of the symbol homosexual men were forced to wear under Nazi occupation. But the ACT UP pink triangle was upside down, turning it into a “symbol of militant resistance.” ACT UP posters of the pink triangle also carried the tagline “SILENCE=DEATH,” underscoring the group’s conviction that straight bystanders, like European Christians during the Holocaust, were complicit in the insidious eradication of people with AIDS.238 The “SILENCE=DEATH” slogan, I would also suggest, resembled the post-Holocaust Jewish communal statement, “Never again,” which insists that Jews will not permit the near annihilation of their people. In this way, ACT UP’s invocation of the Holocaust was not just about arousing the attention of apathetic Americans. ACT UP’s rhetoric and activism was also an attempt to present American gays as different from European Jews and homosexuals; gays, ACT UP insisted, were going to fight back.

ACT UP became notorious, and frequently chastised by mainstream media, for such events as seizing control of the FDA headquarters to demand greater transparency in AIDS research, for staging a massive protest of the Catholic Church and New York City’s Cardinal John O’Connor, and for interrupting a live broadcast of the CBS Evening News.

237 Jordan, Recruiting Young Love, 185.

238 ACT UP was not the first to use the pink triangle or the slogan “Silence = Death.” The pink triangle had been used by various gay rights groups since the 1970s. And an AIDS activist group called the Silence = Death project plastered New York City with flyers prior to ACT UP. Members of the Silence = Death Project attended the first ACT UP meeting in 1987 and allowed their slogan to be used in ACT UP materials.
Given their many public protests, I will briefly focus on just one event: the 1992 “Ashes Action,” where hundreds of ACT UP members wielded cremated ashes of AIDS bodies onto the White House lawn. I turn to this specific protest because the focus on cremated ashes and burned bodies fits, I believe, with the Holocaust trope regularly deployed by ACT UP. “Ashes Action” also attempted to transform AIDS deaths into a productive source of societal change, thereby connecting tropes of the Holocaust to tropes of martyrdom.

In 1992 ACT UP chapters across the country distributed flyers of an urn containing text advertising a “political funeral” in Washington D.C. Part of the flyer’s text read, “[President] George Bush believes that the White House gates shield him, from you, your loss, and his responsibility for the AIDS crisis. Now it is time to bring AIDS home to George Bush.” The flyer continued with the announcement that, “we will carry the actual ashes of people we love…to the White House. In an act of grief and rage and love, we will deposit their ashes on the White House lawn. Join us to protest twelve years of genocidal AIDS policy.” By “Ashes Action” in October 1992, more than 185,000 Americans had died from AIDS, and ACT UP insisted that those deaths were a genocide. People with AIDS, from this perspective, were killed by an apathetic government that did not view gays or others hardest hit by AIDS as legitimate citizens.

239 For a discussion of, as well as documentary footage of, each of these events, see United in Anger: A History of ACT UP, directed by Jim Hubbard (2012), DVD.


241 Ibid.
And because funeral directors regularly refused to embalm AIDS corpses out of a misunderstood fear of contagion, the final place most AIDS bodies were taken, as with so many Jews in Nazi concentration camps, was to crematoriums. Taking those ashes to the White House was a way to insist that the dead will not go unnoticed, to proclaim that they are Americans who demand recognition. By throwing massive amounts of cremated ashes onto the White House lawn, ACT UP not only attempted to raise awareness of an American holocaust, they also created a scene of spectacle mourning where they hoped the dead would transform the President’s attitudes, or, at least, the attitudes of apathetic Americans witnessing the protest on television. Although ACT UP did not use rhetoric of martyrdom, turning death into a site of hoped-for societal transformation is a common martyrrial strategy. The cremated ashes were evidence of unjust persecution, of a holocaust, and also an attempt to convert indifferent Americans through the public display of cremated remains. And yet, the media’s response to “Ashes Action,” and to most of ACT UP’s protests, was largely dismissive and unsympathetic. Additionally, many gays and lesbians outside of ACT UP insisted that the group’s provocative protests were an unproductive strategy for gaining empathy or social acceptance. For such advocates, ending the “homosexuals’ holocaust” could only be achieved by integrating gays into straight society so that gay men and lesbians would be valued as full American citizens.

242 For a discussion of funeral directors refusing to embalm, or even accept those who had died from AIDS into their funeral homes, see Sharon Bass, “Funeral Homes Accused of Bias on AIDS,” New York Times (New York, NY), Nov. 15, 1987.

243 For a lengthy discussion of the media’s recurrent dismissal of ACT UP, see Gould, Moving Politics. See also, Petro, After the Wrath of God.
Polite Mourning, (Fictional) Acceptance, and Gay AIDS Martyrs

While ACT UP represented confrontational AIDS activism, by the late 1980s a new AIDS memorial elicited overwhelmingly positive approval from mainstream media and from straight Americans. That memorial, the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, explicitly upheld gay AIDS deaths as “martyrs.” In this section I will explore the AIDS Quilt in order to understand its appeal among straight and gay Americans. I will also examine two popular representations of gay men with AIDS from the 1990s: the film *Philadelphia* and the play *Angeles in America*. I am primarily interested in understanding the ideologies that these productions promoted that contributed to their popularity. I am focusing on *Philadelphia* and *Angels in America* because the protagonists in both function well as gay martyrs. I will, therefore, explore how the AIDS Quilt, *Philadelphia*, and *Angels in America* fit within tropes of martyrdom. I will also gesture to how their popularity illuminated key features of acceptable gay martyrs, and acceptable gay citizens, that became significantly more prevalent with the martyrdom of Matthew Shepard in 1998.

The genesis of the AIDS Memorial Quilt, according to its founder Cleve Jones, was connected to Harvey Milk’s legacy. Jones coordinated a candlelight march in San Francisco every year on the anniversary of Milk’s death. When addressing the gathered crowd for the 1985 march, Jones used rhetoric not typical to the AIDS epidemic; he referred to the dead as gay martyrs. Invoking Milk’s memory, he declared:

Yes, Harvey [Milk] was our first collective martyr, but now we have many more martyrs and now our numbers are diminished and many of us have been condemned to an early and painful death. But we are the lesbian woman and gay men of San Francisco, and although we are again
surrounded by uncertainty and despair, we are survivors and we shall survive again. 

That Jones referred to gay AIDS deaths as martyrs before initiating the AIDS Quilt is revealing. As scholar of early Christianity, Elizabeth Castelli, writes, “Spectacle is a crucial dimension of martyrology—martyrs, after all, need an audience.”

Innocence, therefore, is not the only condition necessary for martyrdom. Martyrs must invite spectators who care that they died. The Quilt was Jones’ attempt to attract an audience, to make AIDS a spectacle that would arouse the attention of Americans who had not noticed the devastation within gay communities. He says that he was “obsessed by the idea of evidence…that if there were a field of a thousand corpses, people would be compelled to act…I wanted to create evidence.”

Jones, of course, could not gather all the AIDS corpses. Instead, like a Holocaust museum curator who collects belongings of the deceased to show the enormity of lives lost, Jones developed the idea of quilt panels, each six-feet by three-feet – the size of a human coffin – to reveal that massive death toll from AIDS. In this regard, each panel represented a person, a “martyr,” who had once lived, and the stitched together collection of coffin-sized panels provided evidence of the destruction wrought by AIDS.

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The AIDS Quilt made its debut in Washington D.C. in 1987, thereby allowing the Quilt to function as a martyr shrine and pilgrimage destination. The first Quilt of nearly 2,000 panels attracted half a million visitors and overwhelmingly positive praise from mainstream media.\textsuperscript{247} In using a quilt as a memorial to attract an audience, Jones said that he “very deliberately adopted a symbol and vocabulary that would not be threatening to nongay people.”\textsuperscript{248} Thus, the most popular AIDS memorial in US history, created at a time when two-thirds of people with AIDS were gay, intentionally had no specific connection to gay culture. And yet, each panel contained the potential for raising awareness of gay lives, loves, and losses. For instance, the memorial panel dedicated to Jac Wall contained an outline of a male figure that was created by a string of sentences reading:

Jac Wall is my lover. Jac Wall has AIDS. Jac Wall died. I love Jac Wall. Jac Wall is a good guy. Jac Wall made me a better person. Jac Wall could beat me at wrestling. Jac Wall loves me. Jac Wall is thoughtful. Jac Wall is great in bed. Jac Wall is intelligent. I love Jac Wall. Jac Wall is with me. Jac Wall turns me on. I miss Jac Wall. Jac Wall is faithful. Jac Wall is a natural Indian. Jac Wall is young at heart. Jac Wall looks good naked. I love Jac Wall. Jac Wall improved my life. Jac Wall is my lover. Jac Wall loves me. I miss Jac Wall. I will be with you soon.\textsuperscript{249}

\textsuperscript{247} For a description of the positive praise from mainstream media, see Marita Sturken, \textit{Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 210 especially.


Here, gay love and sex are part of what is mourned as Jac Wall is inscribed into the martyrial memorial. Thus, while Jones wanted the Quilt to be palatable to straights, those who made panels had freedom to memorialize the dead in any way they chose.

Although each person had creative liberties when constructing panels, for Jones the Quilt was meant to represent gay men in ways that did not make them appear consumed with sex or different than straights. When describing the Quilt as a strategy for attracting apathetic Americans to care about dying gay men, Jones says that, “At the time, HIV was seen as the product of aggressive gay male sexuality, and it seemed that the homey image and familial associations of a warm quilt would counter that.”\(^{250}\) The Quilt, therefore, was intended to evoke connotations of the home and family, not the cultures, institutions, and sexual practices that gay men had created. As scholars of martyrdom repeatedly emphasize, martyrs are meant to inspire conversion.\(^{251}\) Jones wanted to convert indifferent and antagonist attitudes about gay men through the Quilt. In the 1980s Reagan-era of “traditional family values,” the Quilt enfolded gay men and people with AIDS into an idiom of domesticity and folksy Americana crafting. In this way, the Quilt sanitized gay life. Visitors did not have to deal with actual gay men and the complexities of their lives; they only had to stand before stitched remnants that carried no chance of contagion. The hospital employees who would not touch AIDS patients, and the social workers who would not enter their homes, could safely visit the Quilt. Writer and gay

\(^{250}\) Jones, “A Vision of the Quilt,” 579.

\(^{251}\) The legacy of martyrs as agents of conversion stems from Tertullian’s oft-repeated saying that “The blood of martyrs is the seed of the church.” See, for example, Joyce Salisbury, The Blood of Martyrs: Unintended Consequences of Ancient Violence (New York: Routledge, 2004).
activist, Steve Abbott, read the mainstream popularity of the Quilt as the message that, “We [straights] didn’t like you fags and junkies when you were wild, kinky and having fun. We didn’t like you when you were angry, marching, and demanding rights. But now that you’re dying and have joined ‘nicely’ like ‘a family sewing circle,’ we’ll accept you.”252 In creating a spectacle memorial, then, the Quilt invited multiple perspectives. Although some gays objected to the Quilt’s tame representation of a decimated gay culture, the Quilt persisted in popularity. The Quilt returned to D.C. the following year with more than 8,000 panels. Sections of the Quilt subsequently toured the country multiple times. It was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize in 1989. The Quilt was also the feature of a documentary that won the Academy Award for best documentary of the year. And the last time the Quilt was displayed on the National Mall in Washington D.C. in 1996, its 40,000 panels were visited by 1.2 million people.253

Part of the appeal of the Quilt, aside from sanitizing gay life, was that it created a venue for both personal and collective mourning that had a Protestant American inflection. Mourning at the Quilt was facilitated by a few unelaborate rituals. Before the Quilt was unfolded for display, volunteers, who were instructed to dress in white – the color of Christian purity – held hands in a circle for a moment of silence before delicately revealing the Quilt. As they unfolded sections of the Quilt, other volunteers read names

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of the dead over a loud speaker, an intonation that offered reverence to, and additional evidence of, the dead. At sunset, Quilt displays often included a candlelight procession while visitors joined together to sing “Amazing Grace,” a Protestant hymn emphasizing redemption. While none of these elements were named as Christian in the Quilt’s materials, they nevertheless contributed to practices familiar to Protestants, and to those living in the Protestant-dominant United States, that created a genteel, decorous mourning space where anger was contained, and where emphasis was on unity. The Quilt, then, functioned as both a symbol of grief and of finding beauty and community in death. Marita Sturken is one of many who has written that the “discourse around the quilt is focused on the ‘good’ that can come out of the epidemic.”

In almost identical language, religion scholar, Peter Hawkins, writes that, “the NAMES Project [Quilt] is often used to identify the good that has come out of the epidemic: the construction of a diverse AIDS community…the formation of a new kind of ‘family’ that joins together gays and straights, men and women.” The AIDS Memorial Quilt was, therefore, not only structured to be unthreatening to those who were not gay, it was also framed as redemptive, in the specifically Christian valence of that word, where death functions as a hopeful promise for a renewed community. In this way, the Quilt further fulfills the martyr trope first presented by the Quilt’s creator, Cleve Jones, by giving meaning to AIDS deaths. According to this redemptive reading, AIDS deaths facilitated a new


society that “joins together gays and straights.” Such a redemptive focus on good coming out of death, however, ignores the ongoing devastation of AIDS, overlooking, for example, that in between the first and final Washington D.C. displays of the Quilt an additional 250,000 Americans died, or that when Senator Jesse Helms asked the Senate in 1987, one week after the first DC display of the Quilt, to prohibit the use of federal funds for AIDS prevention that would “promote or encourage” homosexual sexual activities, only two senators voted against his proposal. In American federal funding for AIDS prevention, and perhaps in most popular representations of AIDS generally, gay sex had to be eradicated.

While the Quilt was the most popular American AIDS memorial, the movie that generated the most attention to the plight of gay men with AIDS, and that achieved widespread accolades from mainstream media, was the film Philadelphia. Released in 1993, Philadelphia was the first major Hollywood studio production to address AIDS. By the film’s release in the twelfth year of the epidemic, more than 200,000 Americans had died from the disease. Philadelphia focuses on a fictional white gay man, played by Tom Hanks, who was fired from his law firm after the senior partners discovered that he was gay and had AIDS. The casting of heterosexual Hanks as the gay lead presented

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256 For a discussion of the numbers of African American and Latinos diagnosed with AIDS by 1990, see Cohen, The Boundaries of Blackness, 21.


258 After the film was released, the family of Geoffrey Bowers came forward and said their son’s story had been stolen by the creators of Philadelphia. Bowers, a gay lawyer in Los Angeles, had been terminated from his law firm after it was discovered that he had AIDS. After his death the family was interviewed by Philadelphia’s screenwriter, but he
moviegoers with an already respected, relatable, American everyman. Additionally, the film opens by going out of its way to present Hanks’ character, a high-achieving lawyer, as universally likable. He is friendly to everyone, knows the janitors’ first names, works hard, is smart, and passes as straight. His gayness is established as incidental, as secondary to his normality. In this way, *Philadelphia* presents a fictional white gay man who, except for being in a relationship with another man, is like white, middle-class, Christian, college-educated, straight Americans. The fictitious character aligned better with the more typical “innocent victims” of AIDS, or “AIDS martyrs,” like Ryan White and Elisabeth Glaser who had achieved positive media coverage. Glaser, for example, who developed AIDS from a blood transfusion after hemorrhaging while giving birth, became a media regular in 1989 and the early 1990s. The *Los Angeles Times* printed an interview in 1989 with someone who worked with Glaser who described her appeal by saying, “She has the AIDS virus, but she isn’t black, she isn’t poor, she isn’t homosexual, she isn’t a drug user. She is like the rest of us.” The “us” obviously meant white, middle-class or wealthy, non-drug using heterosexuals. Hanks’ character, in the first major motion picture to deal with AIDS, was a gay version of someone like the supposed “rest of us.” His gayness, the one aspect that made him different from the white, straight,

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259 The film does not address the character’s religion, but his apartment has at least one prominent cross displayed on the wall.

male mainstream, was stripped of overt sexuality. He has a boyfriend, thereby presenting him safely in a coupled relationship, but their relationship is depicted more as a friendship than a romance. They are never seen in bed together and viewers never see anything that even hints at gay sex. The only same-sex kiss in the entire film takes place with Hanks’ back to the camera, so audiences only hear the sound of a quick peck on face; the audience is never confronted with two men expressing love in a physical, much less erotic, way. The film does, however, address that Hanks’ character got HIV from having sex with a stranger that he met in an X-rated movie theater. The movie makes it explicitly known, though, that he only engaged in such anonymous sex once in his life, in 1984 before transmission was understood, and that he contracted HIV during that one encounter. He is, in other words, the gay innocent victim.

Near the end of Philadelphia, when Hanks’ character sits on the witness stand to testify against the senior partners who fired him, he opens his shirt to show the court the multiple KS lesions that cover his chest and torso. Like Christ’s bodily wounds incurred before crucifixion, the public exposure of AIDS bodily markings while on trial configures Hanks’ character, I suggest, as a suffering martyr who endures tortuous fleshly pain and public humiliation before his immanent physical death. His trial, therefore, was not simply about him, but about the social injustices against gay people and those with AIDS. Although he will die, as with the prototypical Christian martyr, Christ, he will ultimately win his trial and transform society. As with martyrologies generally, the explicit goal of the film was to convert attitudes. The film’s straight director told the

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261 Hanks and his partner do share one slow dance together during a Halloween party.
press that, “I made this movie for people like me: people who aren’t activists, people who are afraid of AIDS, people who have been raised to look down on gays.”

For many journalists, Philadelphia achieved its goal of appealing to straights who had been otherwise apathetic or antagonistic toward gay people with AIDS. Time magazine, for example, reported that, “America seemed to be accepting a few heretical notions: that a homosexual could earn respect and sympathy; that a star like Tom Hanks could play a gay man with credible grace.” Yet, the “homosexual” who “could earn respect and sympathy,” was not real. Not only was the character played by a straight man, the character itself was invented. The story of an actual gay man with AIDS may have been too complicated or could have involved too many sexual partners to have converted stereotypical attitudes about gays. But this particular point, that Hanks’ character was successful because he was fictitious, fits well within historical constructions of martyrrologies. As scholar of early Christianity, Candida Moss, makes clear, martyr narratives are almost universally fabrications.

Even when the so-called martyr actually existed, the martyr is typically more legendary than historical. Hanks’ character, therefore, functions well as a gay AIDS martyr. Even though he was not named as a martyr by the film’s director or screenwriter, he was constructed as a representative figure standing in for gay men with AIDS who would suffer as an outcast, endure public


humiliation, die, and, in dying, convert attitudes through the spectacle of his suffering and death.

When Tom Hanks won the Academy Award for his role in *Philadelphia*, he enfolded his character and people with AIDS into explicitly religious idioms. He said:

> I know that my work in this case is magnified by the fact that the streets of heaven are too crowded with angels. We know their names. They number a thousand for each one of the [AIDS] red ribbons that we wear here tonight. They finally rest in the warm embrace of the gracious Creator of us all. A healing embrace that cools their fevers, that clears their skin, and allows their eyes to see the simple, self-evident, common sense truth that is made manifest by the benevolent Creator of us all and was written down on paper by wise men, tolerant men, in the city of Philadelphia two hundred years ago.

Here, Hanks casts gay men who died from AIDS not as sinners but as “angels.” He redeems their deaths and bodily suffering by describing them as being in the “healing embrace” of the “benevolent Creator” who did not condemn them for homosexuality, but who welcomed them into the divine realm. In invoking “Philadelphia two hundred years ago,” Hanks also pronounces that gays are American citizens, that they are part of the national body. *Philadelphia* and Tom Hanks, therefore, created a venue for straight Americans to reconsider their ideas about AIDS and gays. For straights uncomfortable with gay sexuality, *Philadelphia* exempted them from facing their discomfort with gay sex and presented them with a fictional man who was meant to seem as mainstream as possible. Hanks’ character, the fictional, desexualized, coupled, middle-class, Christian,

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265 For a transcript of Tom Hanks’ 1994 Academy Award acceptance speech, see “Academy Award Acceptance Speech Database,” accessed November 21, 2014, [http://aaspeechesdb.oscars.org/link/066-1/](http://aaspeechesdb.oscars.org/link/066-1/).
white man, became an acceptable gay American, and an acceptable gay martyr, with AIDS.

The following year, 1994, Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*, a two-part, seven hour, fictional play about AIDS premiered on Broadway after receiving rave reviews in San Francisco, London, and after it had won the Pulitzer Prize in drama. *Angels in America* ran on Broadway for over a year, received a Tony for best play, and was widely praised by critics. Theater scholar David Savran has written that, “Not within memory has a new American play been canonized by the press as rapidly as *Angels in America.*”266 The play, which is largely about gay men and AIDS in 1980s New York, was generally regarded as one of the most impressive theatrical creations of the twentieth century.267 Given that the play is a seven-hour performance, I am hardly able to give it ample analysis here. Instead, I want to highlight that the play’s protagonist functioned as a fictional gay AIDS martyr even as *Angels in America* depicted gay men in more nuanced ways than *Philadelphia*. In other words, *Angels in America* achieved mainstream popularity without excising gay sex from portrayals of gay men. The play presents gay men neither as conformists to heterosexual life scripts, nor as sex deviants driven exclusively by seeking sexual conquests. For instance, in an early scene, the lead character, Prior Walter, says to his boyfriend, “If I hadn’t spent the last four years


fellating you I’d swear you were straight.”268 Later, his boyfriend, Louis, cruises for sex in Central Park after he becomes overwhelmed by Prior’s AIDS diagnosis. The play does not shy away from the overt sexuality endemic to cruising as Louis says to the man he just met, “I want you to fuck me, hurt me, make me bleed.”269 The scene is not gratuitous. Instead, it shows a deeply conflicted character unsure of how to live with someone who is dying while he remains healthy. *Angels* is also unique in that the protagonist, unlike in *Philadelphia*, is not entirely gender conforming. In a fantasy scene, Prior dresses in drag and says to himself, “Oh my queen; you know you’ve hit rock-bottom when even drag is a drag.”270 To some extent, then, *Angels* has a camp sensibility, giving humor to the horror of AIDS in ways that allows audiences to respond to the epidemic without insisting on either decorous mourning or militant activism.

*Angels in America* recurrently employs religious motifs throughout the show. For instance, Prior Walter, the fictional, white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant protagonist, becomes a prophet who, like Jacob in the Bible, must wrestle an angel in order to receive the blessing he desperately wants: “more life.” Intersecting with each of the main characters is a Mormon family. The play both mocks and shows respect for Mormonism. In an early scene, after a Mormon character tells Prior that her church does not believe in homosexuals, he responds by saying, “In my church we don’t believe in Mormons.”271

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269 Ibid., 60.

270 Ibid., 37.

271 Ibid., 38.
But through another Mormon character’s guidance, Prior comes to accept his role as a prophet, finding comfort that Joseph Smith, the Mormon founder and prophet, also met an angel in New York. Later, when Prior goes to heaven, he tells the angels that if God should return “after all the terrible days of this terrible century,” he would “sue the bastard for walking out.” Here, AIDS is connected to the many horrors of the twentieth century, and the gay protagonist vocally expresses his rage about such ongoing devastations. Scenes such as these construct multi-dimensional gay characters who are angry, sexual, gender non-conforming, and, perhaps, likable because they are not banal or carbon copies of what the dominant culture typically imagines or prescribes for gay men. And yet, here too, the play and its characters are works of fiction, and the play, although a historical drama, is replete with elaborate fantasy scenes.

At the show’s conclusion, the main character returns from heaven and ends the play at Central Park’s Bethesda Fountain. The concluding fountain scene is meant to serve as an explicit reference to the Christian Gospel of John where the angel Bethesda blesses a pool of water with healing powers. The Protestant protagonist closes the show with an overt Christian story of redemptive healing and proclaims to the audience, “And I bless you: More Life. The Great Work Begins.” Angels in America culminates not in anger, despair, death, or genocide, but, as with martyr narratives generally, with life, a hope for redemptive healing, and a challenge to improve the world. Prior Walter, like Hanks’ character in Philadelphia, functions as an acceptable gay AIDS martyr, a

272 Ibid., 264.

273 Ibid., 280, original emphasis and capitalization.
fabricated figure whose suffering, a suffering positioned alongside angels and a trip to heaven, is meant to convert the attitudes of indifferent Americans about gay men with AIDS. As I explore in chapter four, the same motifs of angels, the Protestant man as martyr-hero, explicit references to Christian concepts, and redemption through death, are the themes that structure what has become one of the most-produced plays in the United States: the story of gay martyr Matthew Shepard in *The Laramie Project*.

The Supersessionism of 1990s Gay Politics

By the time medications were introduced in 1995 that transformed HIV from a deadly disease into a manageable chronic illness, American gay politics had begun to shift attention away from AIDS as a movement priority and to marriage and military service as political foci. The shift happened amidst tensions within gay and lesbian communities about how best to improve the status of sexual minorities in the United States. For some, especially for members of ACT UP and Queer Nation, a group founded in 1990 to combat antigay violence and homophobia, the AIDS death toll and ongoing antigay hostilities confirmed that straights and straight society needed to change. Others, such as those aligned with the increasingly influential Human Rights Campaign, lobbied for gays and lesbians to be included in pre-existing social institutions rather than to overhaul major social norms. The increased emphasis on military service, marriage, and assimilation within 1990s gay politics was, in part, connected to the 1992 election of President Bill Clinton and his outreach to gay Americans. For the first time in US history, the country’s President wanted to work with gays and lesbians. The shift in gay politics

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274 I should add that HIV only shifted in significant ways for those who had access to adequate healthcare, sufficient finances, and the ability to take up to twelve pills a day.
toward assimilation in the 1990s also happened because many AIDS activists had died, many others were fatigued from years of fighting, and, importantly, many younger gays and lesbians—who came of age after HIV was understood as preventable—wanted gay activism to have a broader scope than just AIDS.

By the ostensible end of the American AIDS epidemic in 1996, a prominent group of gay advocates, garnering cachet in both gay and mainstream media, presented the gay communities of the 1970s as the dark past of gay history that had to be eradicated in order for gays to gain social acceptance through marriage. I term this reading of gay history that presents monogamous marriage as superior to the gay cultures and practices of the 1970s as “supersessionist gay politics.” My focus on supersessionism is to call attention to the ways in which this political ethic and understanding of history is informed by unmarked Christian ideas and norms. The Christian narration of history is one that moves from the dark, backwards days of Judaism and into the light and truth of Christ. In this configuration, Jewish cultures and practices are rendered invalid because they have been superseded by Christian thought. While Judaism moves along a linearity toward messianic times, it does not ground the present in a rejection of a backwards past. As literary scholar Michael André Bernstein highlights, “unlike Christianity, that is, Jewish thinkers did not interpret the texts of another religion as earlier, incomplete prefigurations of their own narratives, and hence they have had no reason to conceive of time as a progression from partial blindness to full vision.”

supersessionism has been imported into gay politics by several prominent gay activists such as Andrew Sullivan, Gabriel Rotello, William Eskridge, Larry Kramer, and Jonathan Rauch as a way of staking claims for normalcy, respectability, and marriage equality by repudiating earlier gay cultures. For example, writing for *The Advocate* in 1997, Larry Kramer admonished, “We brought AIDS upon ourselves by a way of living that welcomed it. You cannot fuck indiscriminately with multiple partners, who are also doing the same, without spreading disease, a disease that has for many years also carried death. Nature always exacts a price for promiscuity.”²⁷⁶ Kramer blames the AIDS epidemic not only on an uninterested government and ambivalent media, but also on gay men and their culture of sexual freedom. He maintains that the institutions and values that gay men established outside of straight society’s norms in the 1970s are the reasons gay men have suffered so tremendously. For Kramer, marriage is the solution, marriage is what prevents promiscuity, and marriage is what gays should have been striving for all along.²⁷⁷

Journalist Gabriel Rotello, also writing in 1997, similarly argues that, “fighting for those rights [of marriage] may turn out to be the most important things gay men can do to assure our own survival,” because, according to Rotello, the “core institution that encourages sexual restraint and monogamy is marriage.”²⁷⁸


²⁷⁷ In his 1989 essay “Report from the Holocaust,” Kramer writes, “Had we been allowed to marry, many of us would not have felt the obligation to be promiscuous.” See Kramer, *Reports from the Holocaust*, 274.

marriage functions as an almost magical cure for HIV, erasing from memory the years when gay men developed safe sex practices to prevent the spread of the retrovirus in ways that had nothing to do with monogamy or marriage. And even though their argument that marriage prevents promiscuity is dubious, Rotello nevertheless asserts that sexual freedom was “disastrous for gay men.” This reading of history casts blame for a medical epidemic that was steeped in homophobia with the epidemic’s victims. In order for gays to prosper, according to this supersessionist model, gay men must discard and disparage the sexual cultures of the past in order to move into the possibility of life (literally) by accepting the dominant culture’s sexual prescription of monogamous matrimony. 

While prominent gay advocates like Kramer and Rotello presented marriage according to a supersessionist narrative, others, like journalist Andrew Sullivan,

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279 Ibid., 291.

280 As marriage increasingly became a political focus, and as gay activism shifted toward assimilatory strategies, a few gay ‘zines – low-budget publications – gained popularity in New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco that insisted gays were social outsiders who should not strive for acceptance into a society that allowed them to die gruesome deaths. Two of the more popular ‘zines were Diseased Pariah News (in print from 1990-1999) and Infected Faggot Perspectives (1991-1993). The publications eschewed assimilation and claims for normalcy. Diseased Pariah News and Infected Faggot Perspectives, while never gaining the political traction of Kramer or Rotello’s writings, represented an alternative 1990s response to the AIDS epidemic that resisted repudiating or erasing earlier gay sexual cultures. For a longer discussion of these publications, see Daniel Brouwer, “Counterpublicity and Corporeality in HIV/AIDS Zines,” Critical Studies in Media Communication 22, no. 5 (2005): 351-371. See also, Thomas Long, “Plague of Pariahs: AIDS ‘Zines and the Rhetoric of Transgression,” Journal of Communication Inquiry 24, no. 4 (2000): 401-411.
described AIDS within a redemptive framework where AIDS made gay acceptability possible. Writing for the *New York Times* in 1996, Sullivan declared:

> AIDS and its onslaught imposed a form of social integration that may never have taken place otherwise...What had once been a strong fear of homosexual difference, disguising a mostly silent awareness of homosexual humanity, became the opposite. The humanity slowly trumped difference. Death, it turned out, was a powerful universalizing experience...AIDS, then, was an integrator.\(^{281}\)

For Sullivan, gays gained acceptance *because of* AIDS. He looks at AIDS history and asserts that mass death over 15 years helped straights learn to like gays. This redemptive reading of history is influenced by Christian martyrrial thought where death is the genesis of new life and a renewed society. In Christian theology, through the prototypical martyr, Jesus, society is saved because he died, because he was a sacrifice for the betterment of the world. Sullivan similarly understands mass death from AIDS as saving gays from their hedonistic and isolating sexual cultures. AIDS, for Sullivan, created opportunities for gays to be welcomed as full American citizens. In insisting that AIDS “imposed a form of social integration that may never have taken place otherwise,” Sullivan both renounces the earlier gay sexual cultures of the 1970s and thanks AIDS for facilitating gay assimilation. Sullivan’s perspective renders death not destructive, but productive. Such a Christian-inspired political ethic gives meaning to AIDS deaths in ways that do not respect those who suffered and died, which, as I explore in relation to martyrs Milk, Shepard, and Clementi, is a common martyrrial strategy that better reflects the political agendas of the martyrrologists than of the dead. The people who died from AIDS did not

necessarily die for anything in particular, especially for marriage or assimilation to a culture that did not treat them well. Further, to claim AIDS as the great “integrator” creates a myopic redemption that gives purpose to gay (white) deaths but not to those of drug users, racial minorities (especially women), or to the ongoing devastation in Africa. But this use of Christian ideas to frame arguments for American gay social acceptance, and the focus on desexualizing gay men in order to present them as respectable, gains tremendous traction within American gay advocacy by the late 1990s—especially in the discourses surrounding the “martyrdom” of Matthew Shepard.

Concluding Thoughts

Even though gay activists employed rhetoric of martyrdom before and after the American AIDS epidemic, gay men with AIDS were not generally upheld as martyrs by either mainstream media or by gay activists during the epidemic’s first fifteen years. External condemnation of homosexuality partially explains why gay men with AIDS were not regarded as innocent victims. The powerful and politically-active religious right used AIDS as evidence that they were always correct about the sin of homosexuality. Gay men with AIDS were blamed for the disease killing them while they were also desperate to get the government to care about them, to invest money in finding a treatment or cure. They were despised my many, overlooked by most, and rent from within about how to respond to the deadly epidemic. Gay communities and activists, in turn, argued about the sexual institutions and practices they had established outside of straight society’s dictates in the 1970s that many believed facilitated death. While some, like the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, promoted capacious sexual possibilities, such perspectives were overshadowed and dismissed as the 1980s progressed and as the
number dead from AIDS reached into the tens of thousands without so much as one word of recognition from the country’s President.

Responses to the AIDS epidemic by mainstream media and by straight Americans proved instructive for those gays and lesbians who wanted to achieve social integration. While Rock Hudson’s AIDS diagnosis generated massive public attention, the response to his disclosure was also about the shock of his sexuality, of learning that leading man Rock Hudson had been gay. He was seen as having lied for years, a lie which could have put unsuspecting straight women at risk for AIDS. Gay social acceptance was, therefore, predicated on disentangling overt gay sexuality from depictions of gays. The NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, for example, was explicitly conceived as a way to present gay men in a “homey” light devoid of “aggressive sexuality” that would not be off-putting to heterosexuals. In this way, the Quilt commemorated a decimated gay culture within idioms of heterosexual domesticity. The Quilt intentionally presented a tame depiction of gay men, and it was widely successful. The same was true for the popular film *Philadelphia*, which constructed a fictional gay man with AIDS who had anonymous sex only once and who, except for being in a couple with another man, was respectable because he was exactly similar to those at the top of the American social hierarchy. Tom Hanks’ fictional gay character in *Philadelphia*, therefore, indicated a strategy for both acceptable gay martyrdom and for acceptable gay citizenship in late-twentieth century America.

In 1990, when the number of Americans dead from AIDS had passed one hundred thousand, Ryan White, the “boy with AIDS,” and the epidemic’s “most famous martyr,” died a spectacle death that elicited mourning across the country. The teenage hemophiliac
was understood as undeserving of death, a recognition not as generously attributed to gay men, IV-drug users, and African Americans and Latinos who had been dying by the thousands. Instead, Ryan White’s AIDS diagnosis and death prompted national attention, extensive media coverage, increased programs for children and hemophiliacs with AIDS, and the naming of the country’s largest federally-funded AIDS program. In turn, his death was constructed as productive for changing attitudes about AIDS. The white, Protestant teenager from American’s heartland showed that sympathy for someone with AIDS was possible, especially if the AIDS patient was not gay. A gay martyr, therefore, apparently needed to be someone already part of America’s mainstream, detached from gay sexuality, and whose death would be understood as unambiguously innocent. Two years after the American AIDS epidemic ostensibly ended, a gay martyr as widely-revered as White would appear to the American public. That young man, someone who looked remarkably similar to, and who shared several characteristics with, AIDS martyr Ryan White, died a gruesome death affixed to a wooden post: the 5’2,” Christian college student, Matthew Shepard.
CHAPTER 4
THE MODEL MARTYR: MATTHEW SHEPARD

One month after gay college student, Matthew Shepard, was murdered in 1998, the national gay and lesbian magazine, The Advocate, emblazoned its cover with the words, “Matthew Shepard Sacrificed.” Rather than describe Shepard as murdered, the gay publication situated Shepard’s death within a religious idiom of sacrifice, as if he were an offering. Similarly, Tony Kushner penned an essay for The Nation when Shepard died entitled, “Matthew’s Passion,” explicitly analogizing Shepard’s murder with Jesus’ crucifixion. In the essay, Kushner portrayed the openly-gay Shepard as a modern-day equivalent to the oppressed and outcast man from Nazareth, a frame of reference The Nation’s readers presumably knew well. The use of Christian imagery to structure Shepard’s death did not just proliferate among gay writers or within the gay press. Vanity Fair, for example, published an extensive exposé entitled, “The Crucifixion of Matthew Shepard.”Likewise, Newsweek’s first article on Shepard was titled, “The Final Days and Nights of a Gay Martyr.” An essay in the Village Voice: “Conjuring the Lives of Martyr Matthew Shepard.”


In her ethnographic memoir about the town where Shepard was murdered, English professor, Beth Lofreda, writes that, “Even before Matt [Shepard] died, he underwent a strange, American transubstantiation, seized, filtered, and fixed as an icon.” In Christian theological language of “transubstantiation,” Lofreda captures how Shepard quickly transmogrified from mortal to martyr, how he became a spectacle death that captivated the American public’s attention. As a writer for the New York Times describes, “In places from Denver to the University of Maryland, people turned out to mourn the soft-spoken 21-year-old who became an overnight symbol of deadly violence against gay people.” Shepard had not been a public figure before he was murdered, but in death he achieved remarkable popularity and widespread veneration. Vigils sprang up across the country as thousands poured into streets, parks, and churches to pray for him and to protest antigay hostilities. Such visible concern over the death of a gay man was hardly a common feature in American public life at the time of his murder. Although tens of thousands of gay men had perished from AIDS over the preceding seventeen years, and even though Shepard’s was one of several antigay murders in the 1990s, the nation fixated on and expressed compassion for Shepard in ways that were unparalleled.


media scholar Jennifer Peterson observes, “Shepard was the first victim of anti-gay violence to be so publicly mourned as a national loss in the mainstream media.” In unprecedented ways, Shepard became a gay death that mattered to the American nation.

In this chapter I will present a discourse analysis of the Matthew Shepard archives to make visible how his death, subsequent legacy, and related arguments for gay social acceptance were shaped by Christian concepts. In order to set up my analysis, I will first provide a brief biographical sketch of Shepard and a summary of his murderers’ confessions and trials. I will then contextualize Shepard’s death and ensuing notoriety within a late twentieth-century historical setting by highlighting important moments in 1990s gay history and politics. Shepard emerged as a gay death that mattered to the country after the worst of the American AIDS epidemic had ended, after increased visibility of white, middle-class gays and lesbians in popular culture, and after gay activists had shifted tremendous energies to presenting gays as no different than family-centered straights. After providing this historical backdrop, I will transition to the chapter’s primary focus: an analysis of the diverse cultural texts about Matthew Shepard. I will begin by examining news articles and essays from the first six months after Shepard died, primarily to determine why so many straight Americans who had never concerned themselves with gay politics suddenly cared about Shepard’s death. I will then turn to how gay writers, activists, and publications intentionally framed Shepard as a martyr in ways that relied on Christian tropes. From there I will direct my attention to

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how Shepard was used to vilify the religious right and ex-gay ministries, as well as how he was depicted as a more legitimate Christian than those who used the Bible to condemn homosexuality, such as the Reverend Fred Phelps. Because Shepard’s notoriety was hardly limited to a few months after his death, I will also examine some prominent cultural representations of him. I will devote special attention to The Laramie Project, a play about Shepard and the aftermath of his murder that became one of the most-frequently produced plays in the United States.\textsuperscript{289} Christian motifs are replete in The Laramie Project and in several additional portrayals of Shepard, so I will analyze the messages that are produced by these representations and proffer reasons for their creators’ reliance on Christian concepts. Martyrs are meant to be spectacles, and in becoming a spectacle, Shepard’s death has invited counter-narratives. I will, therefore, provide a brief overview of some counter-perspectives that have sought to undermine Shepard’s image as an innocent victim. The chapter will conclude with an analysis of the messages that are inculcated when Shepard is invoked as a martyr.

As this chapter will demonstrate, Matthew Shepard’s murder and the ensuing construction of him as a martyr reveals a historical moment when Christian ideas significantly shaped arguments for gay acceptance in America. This chapter will challenge assumptions that secular gay activism has been oppositional to or free from Christian influence. A close examination of the discourses surrounding Matthew Shepard’s murder illuminates how appeals for gay social acceptance at the end of the

\textsuperscript{289} For a detailed description of the success of The Laramie Project as one of the most widely produced plays in the United States, see Charles Isherwood, “Laramie’s Past Isn’t Dead. It’s Not Even Past,” New York Times (New York, NY), Feb. 14, 2013.
twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries were facilitated by the use of Christian ideas. In turn, Protestant Christian dominance in America has been obfuscated whenever Christianity has been understood primarily as an antigay monolith. Secular gay advocates, especially in relation to Matthew Shepard, frequently reinforced Christian dominance through repeated use of Christian ideas to structure Shepard’s posthumous public presence and influence. As I will show in this chapter, Shepard’s appeal was unequivocally connected to constructions of him as both Christ-like and as an upstanding, young, Protestant man. Whereas Harvey Milk’s Jewishness was diminished in death so he could better fit within the Protestant American mainstream, Shepard’s Protestant identity was emphasized so he could represent the apparently ideal late twentieth-century American gay citizen: a nonsexual, practicing Protestant. In turn, Shepard has been used as a proselytizing figure to evoke empathy and support for gay equality among America’s dominant culture of straight Christians.

Biographical Sketch of Matthew Shepard

Matthew Wayne Shepard was born on December 1, 1976 in Casper, Wyoming, the first-born son of Judy and Dennis Shepard. The Shepards remained in Wyoming until Matthew was in high school when the family moved to Saudi Arabia so Dennis Shepard, an engineer in the oil industry, could pursue a job opportunity. An American high school did not exist in Saudi Arabia at that time, so Matthew completed his secondary schooling at a boarding school in Switzerland. While on a school holiday during his senior year he traveled with a group of friends to Morocco where, one night while out by himself, he was attacked and gang raped by a group of Moroccan men. Shepard notified the local police, but no arrests were made. Although the rape in Morocco was not part of the initial
reporting about Shepard when he became a media spectacle in 1998, news of the assault did surface in the ensuing months, especially when his mother began to speak with reporters four months after he died. According to those interviews, Shepard was severely traumatized by the attack in Morocco, suffering from violent nightmares, paranoia, periods of depression, and panic attacks for which he took medication. After returning to his boarding school and graduating in 1995, Shepard moved from Switzerland to North Carolina to attend Catawba College, a small liberal arts school. He withdrew from Catawba after less than a year and moved to Casper, Wyoming and then to Denver, Colorado where he worked a series of odd jobs. In the fall of 1998, at the age of 21, he resumed his college education by enrolling in his parents’ alma mater, the University of Wyoming at Laramie.

During his brief time at the University of Wyoming, Shepard declared a major in political science. He also joined the student-run lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender group, as well as the Canterbury Club, an organization for Episcopalian students. Less than two months into the semester, on Tuesday evening, October 6, 1998, Shepard went to a Laramie dive bar, the Fireside Lounge, by himself. For reasons that remain unclear, Shepard left the bar with two local Laramie residents, Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson. According to Aaron McKinney’s taped confession, he and Henderson pretended to be gay so they could lure Shepard, who had confided that he was gay, out of the bar so they could rob him. The three men left the Fireside Lounge, got into a truck, and as Henderson drove, McKinney told Shepard, “We’re not gay and we’re going to
McKinney assaulted Shepard while Henderson turned onto a dirt road, proceeding toward a deer fence just beyond a housing subdivision on the outskirts of town. Once stopped, McKinney pulled Shepard from the truck and continued to attack him. Henderson grabbed rope and bound Shepard to the fence, tying Shepard’s hands behind him in a handcuffed position. With Shepard slumped on the ground, his feet outstretched in front of him and his arms tied behind him, McKinney proceeded to beat Shepard with a .357 Magnum. The coroner’s report indicated that Shepard’s skull was struck with the butt of the gun twenty times. When McKinney finished assaulting Shepard, he and Henderson left Shepard bound to the fence, alive but in nearly freezing temperatures. The next day a college student spotted Shepard while riding his bike but initially believed he had seen a scarecrow tied to a fence. Upon closer inspection he noticed Shepard’s hair and rushed to the nearest house to call 911. The first responder to the scene reported that she assumed Shepard was about 13 years old because of his small stature. Standing at 5’2,” the 21-year-old Shepard weighed only 105 pounds and wore orthodontic braces. Still alive but with severe brain trauma and hypothermia, Shepard was taken from the local Laramie hospital to a larger facility in Fort Collins, Colorado. Shepard never regained consciousness and died five days later, on October 12, 1998.

McKinney and Henderson were arrested two days after they attacked Shepard. McKinney’s girlfriend told police and the press that McKinney and Henderson “just wanted to beat him [Shepard] bad enough to teach him a lesson not to come on to straight

people,” which McKinney corroborated when he reported that the assault happened after Shepard grabbed his leg as they were riding in the truck. When juror selection concluded for Henderson’s trial six months later, Henderson switched his plea to guilty and was subsequently sentenced to two consecutive life sentences. McKinney’s trial began in October 1999, one year after Shepard’s murder. His lawyers argued that McKinney became violent when Shepard touched his leg in a sexually-suggestive manner because of residual trauma from childhood sexual abuse. The trial’s judge, however, ruled that such an argument, a sort of “gay panic” defense, was inadmissible in Wyoming. After the jury found McKinney guilty of robbery, kidnapping, aggravated assault, and felony murder, Shepard’s parents and McKinney reached an agreement to avoid the death penalty. McKinney was sentenced in 1999 to two consecutive life sentences without the possibility of parole.

Historical Background and Setting


292 McKinney’s lawyers never used the term “gay panic,” but their argument was that McKinney brutally assaulted Shepard because he was triggered by a negative association with homosexuality and with a past experience of unwanted male sexual touch. As queer theorist, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, writes, gay panic defense strategies assume that, “all gay men may plausibly be accused of making sexual advances to strangers and, worse, that violence, often to the point of homicide, is a legitimate response to any sexual advance whether welcome or not.” See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 19. For more on the history of the gay panic defense, as well as its use in McKinney’s trial, see Casey Charles, “Panic in *The Project:* Critical Queer Studies and the Matthew Shepard Murder,” *Law and Literature* 18, no. 2 (2006): 225-252.
Matthew Shepard’s murder, and the vast attention it received, occurred within a historical setting where issues relevant to gay Americans had become increasingly visible and pervasive in the United States. As historian, John D’Emilio, observed, “the world turned”\textsuperscript{293} in the 1990s, meaning that gay politics mattered to the nation in ways far greater than they had during any earlier historic period. In many ways, this change began with the 1992 presidential election. While campaigning for president, Bill Clinton became the first United States presidential nominee to seek the support of gays and lesbians. One campaign promise Clinton made was to address the military’s policy that barred gays from enlisting in the armed forces. Debate about the military’s ban on gays and lesbians became a national focus days after Clinton was sworn into office.\textsuperscript{294} The deliberation on whether gays should be permitted to serve in the military lasted for months, which kept gay politics and citizenship at the fore of American public consciousness. By July 1993 President Clinton reached a sort of compromise that was named “Don’t ask, don’t tell,” where gays and lesbians could enlist and serve in the armed forces as long as they never made their sexual identity or practices public.

While the role of gays in the military was still being debated, nearly one million gay and lesbian Americans united for the 1993 March on Washington in April of that year. This was the third such march in US history. The first was in 1979, a year after Harvey Milk’s assassination, and initially conceived as an opportunity for the disparate


\textsuperscript{294} For more on this, see D’Emilio, \textit{The World Turned}, 87.
gay and lesbian groups throughout the country to assemble in Washington. By 1993 large gay advocacy and lobbying organizations, like the National Gay and Lesbian Taskforce and the Human Rights Campaign, had headquarters in Washington. The 1993 march featured a series of prominent speakers as well as seven political demands that called for the repeal of sodomy laws, more money for AIDS research, and governmental protections for gay and lesbian families. The demand for the protection of “families” specifically included a public petition for the legalization of same-sex marriage. Queer scholar Michael Warner has written that, “Since the 1993 March on Washington, marriage has come to dominate the political imagination of the national gay movement in the United States.” According to Warner, the growing interest in same-sex marriage was symptomatic of an increasingly popular strategy among gay activists in the 1990s where gays were presented as similar to straights, largely meaning that gays and lesbians mostly wanted opportunities to marry and raise children. The issue of same-sex marriage became a national news topic just weeks after the 1993 March on Washington when the Hawaii Supreme Court ruled in Baehr v. Lewin that the state’s refusal to sanction same-sex marriages was a form of discrimination. The court, in turn, remanded the case back to a lower court to determine if the state had a compelling reason to restrict same-sex couples

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297 Since the initial ruling, Baehr v. Lewin has been renamed Baehr v. Miike.
from obtaining marriages in Hawaii. Subsequently, same-sex marriage became a national news topic that captured the attention of not just gays and lesbians but also of those vehemently opposed to gay rights.

While arguments for same-sex marriage were gaining momentum within gay activist organizations in the 1990s, the religious right, in particular, made same-sex marriage a national political issue. As sociologist, Tina Fetner, writes, “It is a much more historically accurate account to claim that the lesbian and gay movement was pulled into the same-sex marriage battle by the religious right’s massive campaign to reinforce the legal exclusion of same-sex couples from marriage.”

The Hawaii Supreme Court’s decision in *Baehr v. Lewin* opened the possibility, although unrealized, that an individual state could grant marriage rights to same-sex couples. Religious right groups began meeting to formulate a response. In January 1996 representatives from twenty conservative Christian groups organized the National Pro-Family Forum, an umbrella organization that petitioned Republican politicians to prevent same-sex marriage from becoming a legal reality at the federal level. The National Pro-Family Forum asked Republican presidential candidates participating in the 1996 Iowa caucus to sign a document pledging their opposition to gay marriage. Every candidate cooperated. The candidates signed the pledge of opposition to same-sex marriage in front of two hundred reporters. Following that media event, one gay activist said, “No one was paying attention to the issue of same-sex marriage up to that point…And then all of a sudden

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bam! This was an issue that was being debated nationwide!" Soon after the Iowa caucus, staff from conservative Christian organizations drafted the Defense of Marriage Act. The Defense of Marriage Act was a bill designed to prevent same-sex couples from receiving federal marriage benefits. The bill also allowed states not to recognize same-sex marriages performed in other states. The Defense of Marriage Act was introduced into Congress in May 1996 and passed with an overwhelming majority in both the House and the Senate. President Clinton signed the bill into law in September 1996, thereby expressly delimiting marriage at the federal level to the union of one man and one woman. As a result of the Defense of Marriage Act, gay advocacy groups increasingly switched attention, energy, and resources to presenting gays and lesbians as deserving of, and deeply interested in, marriage and establishing families. Tina Fetner writes that, “To a greater extent than ever before, lesbian and gay movement organizations began to frame lesbian and gay rights in terms of relationships and families, rather than just individuals.” Thus, Shepard’s murder in 1998 occurred at a time when gay activists were framing pleas for gay rights through images of gays as part of families who, rather than wanting sexual revolution, wanted opportunities to marry, raise children, and serve their country in the military.

The years leading up to Shepard’s murder in 1998 were also a period of greater visibility of gay and lesbian characters in American popular culture. Philadelphia, as discussed in chapter three, was the first commercially-successful movie with a gay

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300 Fetner, How the Religious Right Shaped Lesbian and Gay Activism, 112.
character in the lead role. The next year, 1994, MTV’s series *The Real World* introduced Americans to a “real” gay man with AIDS, Pedro Zamora. The reality show exposed viewers to the banality of a gay man’s life as well as to the struggles of fighting AIDS. The show broadcasted his commitment ceremony, his struggles with a homophobic roommate, and his advocacy for AIDS causes. He became such a prominent national name as a result of *The Real World* that President Clinton released a statement honoring Zamora when he died. And, in the fall of 1994, the successful NBC show *Friends* premiered and included a recurring lesbian guest character. The sitcom regularly featured her in scenes with her partner as they co-parented a child.

While a few television shows in the 1990s depicted gay characters in supporting roles, it was not until 1997 when a gay character had the lead role in a primetime series. In the third season of Ellen DeGeneres’ popular sitcom *Ellen*, her character came out as a lesbian in a much-hyped two-part episode. In real life, DeGeneres also came out as gay. One year later, and a few weeks before Matthew Shepard was murdered, another primetime show with a lead gay character, *Will & Grace*, premiered and became a commercially successful series. Shepard was, thus, killed at a time when white gay and lesbian characters were becoming a more frequent and noticeable presence in American popular culture.

At the end of the decade, *The Advocate* asked its readers to select the most significant moment for gay Americans from the preceding ten years. The three most popular answers were Matthew Shepard’s murder, Ellen DeGeneres’ coming-out, and
President Clinton’s elections.\textsuperscript{301} That Matthew Shepard’s murder was deemed as one of the most important moments of the 1990s underscores the vast amount of attention his death received. His notoriety did not quickly vanquish. In 2003 a writer for \textit{The Advocate} similarly proclaimed that, “Ellen DeGeneres raised and normalized the profile of gay life in America when she came out in 1997; then Matthew Shepard’s murder in 1998 emerged as, arguably, the most visible and accessible point of reference for public discussion about gay people in American history.”\textsuperscript{302} Five years after his death, \textit{The Advocate} situated Shepard’s murder as one of the most exceptional events in US history when a vast cross-section of the population took an interest in the death of a young gay man who most had never known in life.

\textbf{A Gay Death that Mattered}

The murder of Matthew Shepard marks a unique moment in United States history when an unprecedented number of Americans seemed to care about the death of a gay man. The outpouring of grief for Shepard was an especially noteworthy situation given the seventeen preceding years of apathy and, at times, vitriolic antagonism toward gay men who had died from AIDS complications. Even though Harvey Milk’s death produced visible sympathy and an ongoing legacy of remembrance, the response to Shepard’s death, someone who had been totally unknown to the American public in life, completely eclipsed the magnitude of any other gay American’s death, Harvey Milk


included. By the week of his funeral, the *Washington Post* declared that, “Shepard’s death has electrified gay America. And it has done more: For the first time, in cities across the United States and Canada, straight people have marched by the thousands to protest anti-gay violence. More than 60 marches and vigils have taken place since his death.” Three days after he died, for example, 5,000 people gathered on the steps of the Nation’s capital to mourn Shepard, as US senators, members of Congress, and celebrities denounced his murder and shared their anguish with the assembled crowd. In New York City a march in memory of Shepard took a chaotic turn when 4,000 marchers blocked traffic and the New York City police arrested more than 100 people. The next night another 1,000 New Yorkers attended a prayer service for Shepard at St. John the Divine in Manhattan. Prayers and an outpouring of sympathy from religious leaders became a visible response to Shepard’s death. One *Los Angeles Times* headline declared, “Religious Leaders Decry Wyoming Man’s Slaying,” and proceeded to describe a public vigil where “Forty Los Angeles-area religious leaders gathered…to lament the brutal slaying of Matthew Shepard, a gay student at the University of Wyoming.” The public display of prayers for a gay man by clergy, and by countless straight Americans, also marks Shepard’s murder as a unique moment in US history. Religious, and especially Christian, condemnation of homosexuality had been a ubiquitous feature of gay visibility

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in American public life since, at least, 1977 when Anita Bryant began her “Save Our Children” campaign. But something was different with Shepard. The Christian Science Monitor published an essay nine days after Shepard died entitled, “Matthew Shepard’s Legacy.” That he already had a “legacy” even though the vast majority of Americans had never heard of him until a few days before he died is noteworthy. For the Christian Science Monitor, Shepard’s legacy was that his murder provoked prayers and compassion from Christians who had never before shown support for gays and lesbians.

In this section I shall propose a set of reasons why Shepard became a gay death that mattered to the nation. I am limiting my analysis in this section to news archives from the first six months after he died so I can explore what Americans initially learned about Shepard. I also want to investigate the ideas that were circulating about gays and lesbians at the time of his death. In effect, a swirling series of circumstances contributed to Shepard’s appeal, and those factors were largely, although not exclusively, infused with Christian concepts and imagery. Shepard’s immediate popularity was, in many ways, facilitated by rhetoric and images that connected Shepard to Christ, Christian practices, and to Christian ideas of martyrrial, sacrificial death of the innocent.


One of the earliest visual images that contributed to Shepard’s notoriety was that of the wooden fence to which he was bound and left for dead. The deer fence where Shepard was tied became a central facet of his story. For example, the *New York Times* opened the paper’s first article about Shepard by writing, “At first, the passing bicyclist thought the crumpled form lashed to a ranch fence was a scarecrow. But when he stopped, he found the burned, battered, and nearly lifeless body of Matthew Shepard, an openly gay college student.” In just two sentences readers learned that a gay college student was brutally beaten and bound to a fence like a scarecrow. The repeated reference to Shepard resembling a scarecrow resulted from how the crime was initially reported by the young man who found Shepard, which was then reiterated by the county sheriff at his first press conference about the crime. The fence to which Shepard was tied was a small deer fence, a style of fence made by crossing wooden logs. Comparing Shepard to a scarecrow, in turn, evoked thoughts of him hanging. The two elements combined—wooden post and scarecrow—suggested images of Christ crucified on the cross, a man hanging to die after enduring brutal torture. One writer for a gay Christian publication presumptively asserted that, “Those who found his body tied to the fence thought it was a scarecrow, which means that Matthew looked like someone crucified.” Similarly, the head of the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles declared at a prayer vigil for Shepard that his tortured body was, “tied to a fence, his arms extended, all too reminiscent of a

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His arms were actually tied behind him and not extended, but the crucifixion comparison, an analogy that evoked empathy in the predominantly Christian country, persisted. The idea that Shepard had been tortured in a way akin to Christ’s crucifixion did not just proliferate among Christian leaders or within Christian publications. Shepard was twice described as a “crucified man” in an essay in *The Nation* that appeared a month after he died. And five months after Shepard was murdered, *Vanity Fair* published, “The Crucifixion of Matthew Shepard.” The essay’s writer does concede, in a parenthetical aside, that Shepard was “not in a crucifixion position.” Yet, the essay’s title suggests that the image of a crucified Shepard was already enshrined as central to the myth of Matthew Shepard. The fence, in turn, became a modern day Calvary or Golgotha, the names given to the site of Jesus’ death. The author of the *Vanity Fair* article writes, “the fence has become a place of pilgrimages…the site conjures thoughts of Golgotha. Small yellow stones have been arranged to form a cross; in every


313 A counter-perspective to the crucifixion imagery is that the thought of him tied to a deer fence evoked images of the Old West, of a lawless society where someone who does not fit is not only murdered but put on display like a coyote nailed to a fence to keep away unwanted visitors. For discussions on this perspective, see Susan J. Balter-Reitz and Karen A. Steward, “Looking for Matthew Shepard: A Study in Visual Argument Field,” in *Visual Communication: Perception, Rhetoric, and Technology*, ed. Diane S. Hope (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2006); Jennifer Petersen, *Murder, the Media, and the Politics of Public Feelings: Remembering Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 34-37, especially.
crevice of the fence are bouquets, notes, stray tokens.” The desire to make pilgrimage, a term awash in religious imagery, continued. *The Advocate* even printed an essay entitled “Hallowed Ground,” about the sacredness of the fence and the legions of pilgrims who had traveled to Laramie so they could cultivate a connection with Shepard.

![Time magazine cover](image)

Figure 2. *Time* magazine cover of the fence where Shepard was killed, October 26, 1998.

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315 See Bruce Vilanch, “Hallowed Ground,” *The Advocate*, July 4, 2000, 47. While this essay was published longer than six months after Shepard’s death, the piece reveals that pilgrimage to the fence remained a constant into the twenty-first century.
In order for Shepard’s death to be construed as a sort of *IMITATIO CHRISTI*—an imitation of Christ—he had to be not just bound to a wooden post, but also, like Jesus, considered innocent. Shepard’s innocence was, in many ways, constructed through depictions of him as childlike. Although he was twenty-one, a legal adult in the United States, he was described and portrayed as an adolescent. The presentation of Shepard as a youth was facilitated by his physical presence. Much was made in the media about his height and weight. Shepard was 5’2” and weighed 105 pounds, which not only made him appear like a child but also as fragile. The juxtaposition of the brutality of his murder combined with Shepard’s small frame contributed to his innocent image. For example, the *Washington Post* described Shepard not only as young, but as having a “cherubic face,” thereby presenting him as youthful within a religious idiom of angelic purity. Similarly, the president of the LGBT student group at the University of Wyoming told the press that, “Matthew was a beloved kid who could have been anyone’s gay son. He was slight of build, which made you want to protect him, and he always had a smile on his face.” In this instance, someone close to Shepard not only highlighted Shepard’s physical vulnerabilities, he also reinforced a childlike image by calling him a “kid” and anyone’s “son.” Framing Shepard as a youth undoubtedly contributed to him becoming a gay death that mattered. As religion scholar, Jodi Eichler-Levine, comments, “Dead

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children demand agreement: they demand that we condemn their horrific deaths.”

Because children are commonly imagined \emph{a priori} as innocents in America, Shepard’s murder seemed all the more heinous since he was so commonly described in childlike ways. Much, though, was also made of Shepard as a college student, which can function in the American imaginary as a liminal stage between adolescence and adulthood. But the American public was habitually reminded that Shepard was a \emph{first-year} student, even though he was 21 and was not in his first year of college. One national news article, for example, described Shepard as a “shy, little-noticed first-year student at the university.” In this regard, not only was Shepard presented as closer to childhood than adulthood, he was also figured as demure. Moreover, Shepard was consistently depicted as a quintessentially good kid. As was widely remarked, he had been an acolyte in an Episcopal church and had been raised a committed Christian. Although he had not served as an acolyte for years, emphasizing that he had been an acolyte structured Shepard a good Christian adolescent and not as an adult man. His “cherubic face” combined with a child’s role in a mainstream Protestant church added to his perceived innocence and to him becoming a gay death that evoked broad sympathies.

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Framing Shepard as a youth was also facilitated by suggestions that he looked like the archetypal boy-next-door. In an interview with the *Washington Post*, Brian Levin, a scholar who studies hate, said, “He looked like an all-American nice kid next door who’d look after your grandmother if you went out of town. He looked like a sweet kid, and he was.”\(^\text{321}\) The article does not make clear how Levin was able to assert definitively that Shepard was “sweet,” but his statement emphasized that Shepard’s image fit within a broad American fantasy of who counts as a good kid. He was white with blond hair. He was also a college student, a signifier of middle-class respectability. Shepard was additionally a Protestant Christian who had been an acolyte who had joined an Episcopal student group at the University of Wyoming. White, college-educated, Christian, young men, like Shepard, are not only typically imagined as innocents, they are also assumed to have futures of great potential, a future that was violently taken away from Shepard. Therefore, references to Shepard as an “all-American,” “next door kid,” and “anyone’s son,” reinforced the American racial, religious, and ethnic hierarchies since the blond, white, Protestant Shepard could not have been anyone’s son. Such language is simply coded rhetoric for privileged, white, usually Christian, youth, which served to highlight that had Shepard not been gay he would have been part of—indeed, at the top of—the American mainstream.

That Shepard was depicted as both childlike and gay also provides insight into why he was a gay death that mattered, especially because, figured as a child, he became a

nonsexual gay youth rather than a sexually-active gay man. In reflecting on the initial months of Shepard’s posthumous popularity, the writer of *Vanity Fair*’s “The Crucifixion of Matthew Shepard,” posits that, “Parents throughout the country felt that Matthew could have been their son, an idea many had never contemplated before about a gay person…He was depicted as having parents rather than partners—loving, affluent, married American parents.” In “having parents rather than partners,” Shepard was desexualized. Instead of describing him as an adult man who had lovers, he became a kid within the American nuclear family. *The Advocate* similarly framed Shepard in familial terms, making him not everyone’s son but everyone’s brother. In their article, “The Lost Brother,” Shepard was said to have become “the lost brother of gay men and lesbians across the country.”

*The Advocate* proceeded to describe Shepard by writing that, “Shepard was a gentle, fun-loving person whose slight build (5 feet 2 inches, 105 pounds) and ebullient disposition made people feel protective toward him, not threatened by him.” The twenty-one-year-old Shepard was stripped of adult sexuality in this description. He was a little brother or young son, not a sexual being. He was explicitly “gentle” and certainly not sexually imposing or threatening. Importantly, though, he remained gay in these representations. But explicit connections between Shepard and gay sex or romantic partners were not the focus of his constructed image. The writer for “The Crucifixion of Matthew Shepard” explains:


324 Ibid., 26.
Most people feel that Matthew Shepard did not represent that contemptible lifestyle [of sexually-active gay men]. A number of residents [of Laramie, Wyoming] told me that they consider Matthew Shepard the first gay person they ever ‘met.’ And the fact that these ‘meetings’ took place after his death seems to have made them all the more significant.\textsuperscript{325}

In Christian resurrection rhetoric where he continued to meet and teach others posthumously, Shepard transmogrified into an image of gay men completely disassociated from bathhouses, pride parades, public sex, and cruising. He was likable because he represented none of those things. Moreover, Shepard was attacked after he stopped into a college dive bar, not a gay club or bathhouse. He was also alone and not walking down the street holding another man’s hand. And the few images of Shepard that were printed in the press consistently showed him wearing preppy attire, such as a plaid button down shirt with his blond hair neatly parted. As opposed to stock images of pride parades, he was not shirtless, in tight pants, dressed in leather, covered in makeup, or gender bending. In other words, for many Americans, and as part of his immediate widespread appeal, Shepard was gay, but without any of the apparent bad gay qualities. For straights who subscribed to a quasi-Christian “love the sinner, hate the sin”\textsuperscript{326}

\textsuperscript{325} Thernstrom, “The Crucifixion of Matthew Shepard,” 272.

\textsuperscript{326} The concept of “love the sinner, hate the sin” is not official church doctrine, nor is it a direct quote from Jesus or the Bible. The phrase is adapted from St. Augustine’s “Letter 211” where he wrote, “With love for mankind and hatred of sins.” In connection to homosexuality and Christianity, the sentiment is meant to imply that one should love a gay person (the sinner) while also condemning gay sex and relationships (the sin). For a lengthy discussion of this phrase and its use in American religion and public life, see Janet Jakobsen and Anne Pellegrini, \textit{Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance} (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004).
approach to homosexuality, Shepard could be embraced because of how he was detached from overt gay sexual expressions.

That Shepard was portrayed as gay but not sexual is crucial to his configured innocence, especially when examining another major media story of 1998: the arrest of pop singer George Michael for cruising in a public restroom. An undercover police officer arrested Michael for lewd behavior in a park bathroom in Beverly Hills, California six months before Shepard was murdered. Michael was alone in the restroom and in the *Los Angeles Times*’ first article about the incident, the arresting officer simply said that he observed Michael “in a lewd act,” and that he “would not elaborate on the nature of the activity,” leaving it unclear if Michael was masturbating or gesturing to the plainclothes officer to go elsewhere for sex. The arrest sent off a media firestorm, and not only because a celebrity had been arrested. Gay male cruising became a national news topic as Americans were informed on how to notice gay cruising so they could notify police. As Michael Warner relates, following George Michael’s arrest, “At least twenty local news programs around the country used the same gimmick during ‘sweeps’ week in 1998, taking undercover cameras into gay cruising areas to arouse normal America’s punitive instincts.” Gay men getting arrested for seeking sexual partners, in other words, did not arouse sympathies from the American populace. Similarly, many gay publications distanced themselves from defending Michael and the many subsequent gay

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men arrested for public cruising. When Shepard’s mother gave her first interview with The Advocate five months after Shepard died, she positioned Shepard as very different from gay men like George Michael. She was asked if there were things about gay people that embarrassed Matthew, and she responded by saying that, “[T]here was one specific instance in a park, and it really angered Matt. He said, ‘That’s just whoring…it brings forth the stereotypical view of gay men and that they’re incapable of having a committed relationship—a monogamous, committed relationship.” Shepard may have felt that public cruising was wrong, or it may have been something he engaged in but did not admit to his parents. But even without Shepard’s mother declaring that he opposed such behavior, Shepard’s media image was already well established as respectable because, unlike George Michael, he had been desexualized. Michael, on the other hand, was figured as an adult gay man who sought sex in the public sphere. And following such historic moments as the 1993 March on Washington and the passage of the Defense of Marriage Act, presenting gay Americans as interested in and capable of monogamous relationships had become a movement priority for many gay activists. By 1998 gay activists had largely distanced themselves from arguments for public sex and, instead, focused on obtaining rights for domesticated couples who willingly relegated sex to the private sphere of the home. Shepard’s mass appeal was, therefore, unequivocally connected to how he was constructed as gay but not publically sexual.

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329 For an extension of this argument of how gay publications did not come to the defense of those arrested for cruising, see Warner, The Trouble with Normal, 155-166.

The depiction of Shepard as a desexualized adolescent was also instrumental to his appeal because of how he stood in contrast to gay men who had died from AIDS complications. As opposed to those who lost their lives to AIDS, Shepard was not imagined as responsible for his death. The entanglement of sex with AIDS created a situation where those with HIV were seen as somehow responsible for their disease. Even during the years when the cause of AIDS was unknown, gay men were nevertheless condemned for inviting the disease through unbridled sexuality. And because symptoms of HIV typically remain dormant for several years, the images of gays dying from AIDS were usually of adult males and not of teenagers. They were explicitly men and sexual; Shepard was childlike and desexualized. Shepard, therefore, was able to represent gay men, and gay death, in a different light—someone who died innocently. Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini write that, “One of the ways that widespread empathy for people with AIDS developed was through images of ‘innocent victims,’ hemophiliacs such as Ryan White, who could simultaneously be one of us (a representative American).”\(^{331}\) As discussed in chapter three, the greatest outpouring of sympathy and support for someone with AIDS during the first fifteen years of the epidemic was not for any of the thousands of dying gay men, but for child hemophiliac Ryan White.\(^{332}\) White was blond, Christian, Midwestern, white, and straight. He had AIDS because of a blood transfusion, not gay sex. White was also an adolescent, not an adult. Matthew Shepard, I contend, became the


Ryan White of the gay movement. He was a tiny, blond, young-looking, white, Protestant acolyte whose murderers claimed they attacked him just because he was gay. For many Americans in 1998, Shepard appeared as innocent as a blond, white, Christian child who got AIDS from a blood transfusion.

What was unknown to the American public when the Shepard case was first reported was that Shepard was HIV-positive. Information about Shepard’s HIV status was not made public until five months after he died. The details came out in Vanity Fair’s “The Crucifixion of Matthew Shepard” when Shepard’s mother revealed that routine blood work in the hospital following the attack came back positive for HIV. The article says, “No one close to Matthew knew he was H.I.V.-positive—or thinks that he himself knew. The infection, detected in the hospital, is thought to have been a very recent one.” 333 That Shepard was HIV positive complicates the image of him as gay but not sexual. However, five months had passed since he had been murdered when this information was revealed, and his image as a desexualized youth was already well enshrined. Just a few weeks after the Vanity Fair article was published, juror selection began for Russell Henderson’s trial. Attention was, thus, redirected back to the way in which Shepard was targeted and brutally attacked. His notoriety and image as an innocent victim continued unabated.

Another way to think through Shepard’s initial appeal is to consider some of the ideas circulating about gays in the culture at the time of his murder. As noted earlier, the 1990s witnessed a visible rise in gay characters in television and film. The gay characters

in popular movies and shows like *My Best Friend’s Wedding*, *Will & Grace*, and *Ellen* featured friendly, white, educated, middle-class gays who were mostly desexualized and who did not engage in scenes of same-sex kissing or sex. As one writer to *The Advocate* said about Ellen DeGeneres’ sitcom, “She [Ellen] portrayed a very normal person, and the straight community needs to see that people who are gay are just as normal as they are.” In this regard, 1990s popular representations of gay Americans largely framed gays as similar to white, middle-class straights. Shepard’s constructed image as an affable, gentle, white, middle-class, gay American fit well within the narrow representations of queer life that straights had already appeared to like and figuratively welcome into their homes. Had Shepard’s murder taken place ten years earlier during the worst of the AIDS epidemic when cultural depictions of gays were not nearly as popular, Shepard could have been a gay death that went unnoticed and without any outpouring of sympathy from straight Americans who might not have considered a 21-year-old gay man as “anyone’s son.”

In addition to resembling representations of gays in 1990s popular culture, Shepard also became a face of 1990s gay political issues, especially hate crimes legislation. President Clinton had proposed an expansion of federal hate crimes laws to include sexual orientation in 1997, but after much debate the legislation never passed through Congress. After Shepard was attacked, Clinton publically urged Congress to

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335 For a description on the status of a federal hate crimes bill that includes protections for LGBT Americans, see pages 230-231 of this chapter.
reconsider passing hate crimes legislation. Similarly, at the vigil for Shepard on the steps of the US Capitol, Senator Edward Kennedy and Congressman Barney Frank pleaded for the passage of a hate crimes bill. Two months after Shepard’s death, Newsweek’s article, “The Final Days and Nights of a Gay Martyr,” proclaimed that Shepard’s “death prompted nationwide outrage and renewed the debate over hate crimes against gays.”

Debates about hate crimes had been taking place prior to Shepard’s murder, but he became a symbol of why, for those who supported such laws, hate crimes legislation was necessary. That Newsweek made this observation in an article in which they named Shepard a “martyr” underscores one discursive function of martyrs. As Brad Gregory writes of Christian martyrs in early modern Europe, “The showdown between martyrs and their persecutors put a human face on doctrinal controversy.” In other words, martyrs humanize what could be perceived as esoteric debates. For the Christians of early modern Europe this included disputes between Protestants, Catholics, and Anabaptists, where the martyrs of each community were said to have died upholding a crucial doctrine. The martyrs made real what had been debated among the elite and ruling classes. And so too with Shepard who became the face of why President Clinton and others believed that sexual orientation should be a protected category under federal hate crimes laws.

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The Making of a Martyr: Christian Ideas within Secular Gay Activism

Strategically connecting Matthew Shepard to Christ and to Christian ideas was, in many ways, facilitated by gay writers and activists who explicitly cast Shepard within Christian frameworks. For example, in an early *New York Times* article about Shepard, the political director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, a large gay advocacy group, said, “There is incredible symbolism about being tied to a fence…People have likened it to a scarecrow. But it sounded more like a crucifixion.” The gay activist wanted to leave no room for ambiguity and insisted that the Christian symbol of “crucifixion,” a word sure to produce an affective connection to the socially-outcast and tortured Christ, was the best descriptor for what happened to Shepard. Therefore, in this section I am going to examine the strategy of joining Shepard to Christ and to Christian concepts. My analysis in this and the next two sections will center on some ways in which secular gay publications, writers, and activists configured Shepard with Christian motifs. Put differently, I am specifically focusing on gay activism and writings outside of religious institutions to explore where religious, usually Christian, ideas appear, and how those ideas have been used to advance Shepard’s notoriety and gay rights causes. As religion scholar, Kathryn Lofton, writes, the secular “is not an absence of religion; rather, the secular is religion’s kaleidoscopic buffet,” meaning that religious ideas can pervade far beyond church walls and sacred texts. Moreover, and as part of my larger project, if

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Christianity is seen as exclusively synonymous with those who oppose homosexuality, one misses how supporters of gay rights have also used Christian rhetoric to substantiate claims for equality and to promote Shepard’s widespread appeal. Christian dominance, in turn, remains in place by the ways in which Christian ideas have been used to advance acceptance of gay Americans.

The Advocate had the highest circulation of any gay publication in the country at the time of Shepard’s death, and printed across the cover of The Advocate’s first issue about Shepard were the words, “Matthew Shepard Sacrificed.” Murder and sacrifice are not synonyms. To proclaim that Shepard was “sacrificed” is to place him within a religious idiom that gives his death purpose. As scholar of early Christian martyrdom, Matthew Recla, writes, “Because sacrifice implies a ‘death-for,’ there is first an immediate redirection of death toward life, the lives of those remaining.” To be sacrificed is to die for something, frequently a community or cause. While this notion of sacrifice is not unique to Christianity, it is foundational to ideas of Christian martyrdom. As Elizabeth Castelli writes, “Willing and self-sacrificing death on behalf of one’s religion, one’s political ideals, or one’s community—martyrdom—is hardwired into the collective consciousness of Western culture and is one of the central legacies of the Christian tradition.” Shepard, however, was not a “willing and self-sacrificing death.”


He did not choose to die, and the men who murdered him claimed that Sheppard was “begging for his life.” To cast Shepard as sacrificed is to declare that he died for something, presumably for gay rights and, thus, to insist that his death had meaning.

While Christianity does not hold a monopoly on sacrificial ideas, Jesus’ crucifixion functions as the model of sacrificial death on which Shepard’s supposed sacrifice was based. In Christian liturgy Jesus’ death is commonly remembered with words from Corinthians: “Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed for us.” Connecting Christ to a Passover lamb is a reference to the ancient Temple in Jerusalem where, at the spring festival of Passover, a young lamb without defect was sacrificed to God on behalf of the Israelite people. In Christian theology, Jesus replaced the animal offering. As God’s son, no sacrifice could be purer or greater. The Christian martyrs, in turn, emulated Jesus by becoming willing self-sacrificial deaths, innocents who, like Jesus, were unjustly persecuted. The Advocate, in declaring that Shepard was sacrificed, situated Shepard’s murder within a Christian framework where the suffering and death of the purportedly pure and innocent—Shepard—had purpose and value. And if there was any question as to whether The Advocate was relying on Christian ideas to depict Shepard and his death, the accompanying article to “Matthew Shepard Sacrificed,” was entitled, “The Good Shepard,” a play on Shepard’s last name with the biblical

343 Quoted in Lofreda, Losing Matt Shepard, 9.
344 1 Corinthians 5:7
metaphor of Jesus as “the good shepherd” who sacrifices his life for his flock.346 The secular gay publication, thus, strategically deployed Christian motifs to make a claim for why Shepard’s death should be taken seriously.

*The Advocate* published a series of articles on the first anniversary of Shepard’s murder with such titles as, “His Story Lives On,” and “Our Media-Made Martyrs.” As with Jesus, whose story has been made meaningful by generations long after he died, *The Advocate* insisted that Shepard’s death continued to have significance. Although Shepard did not elect to die or suffer horrifically, *The Advocate*’s invocation of Shepard as a “martyr” fulfills Elizabeth Castelli’s description of how martyrdom functions as an “authorizing trope.”347 In other words, naming Shepard as a martyr acts as a way of giving him cultural authority, of demanding that his death matter to Americans. The trope of martyrdom is authorizing because of the ways in which the US is already profoundly shaped by Christian ideas. As Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini write, “Christian theological pronouncements have become so institutionalized in the official life of the nation that they can be taken for just good old American values.”348 One such Christian theological concept that transcends into American values is the belief that suffering and death can be redemptive, that good comes out of evil. For example, when *The Advocate* writer proclaims in “Matthew Shepard One Year Later” that “the world has changed

346 Jesus is described in the Gospel of John as the “good shepherd” who, in sacrificial language, “lays down his life for his flock.” See John 10: 11-18.

347 Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 189.

because of the tragedy last October,” Shepard’s brutal murder is given a redemptive reading by declaring that the world transformed because of his death. Good came out of evil, there was reason not randomness, and the world improved because of Shepard’s suffering. These are messages that Christians, and those living in the predominantly Christian United States, have heard circulated widely and that are commonly taken as a given because of their ubiquity. In this regard, martyrdom is an “authorizing trope” because it situates Shepard in a pre-established discourse that gives his murder purpose while concurrently arousing empathy from straight Christians who might not normally pay attention to the death, or life, of a gay man.

Tony Kushner similarly capitalized on the emotional effect of comparing Shepard’s murder to Jesus’ crucifixion by writing a searing polemic for *The Nation* entitled, “Matthew’s Passion” that was published one month after Shepard died. The “passion” is the name given to the sections of the Gospels that depict Jesus’ final days, arrest, torture, and crucifixion. In the Gospels, the responsibility of Jesus’ death does not just reside with the governor, Pontius Pilate, who ordered Jesus’ execution. Rather, the Jews, as a collective body, are rendered responsible for Jesus’ death for turning him over to the Roman authorities, for rejecting what he taught, and for mocking him as he was tortured. Later Christian history largely exonerated the Roman authority and gave all blame for Jesus’ death to the Jews. Similarly, in “Matthew’s Passion,” Kushner does


350 Not until the Second Vatican Council in 1965 did the Roman Catholic Church explicitly rule that Jews should not be held responsible for Jesus’ death.
not blame McKinney or Henderson for Shepard’s death. Instead, for Kushner, responsibility rests first with Republicans and the religious right, and then with the Pope. For example, he writes that the Republican Party “endorses discrimination against homosexuals and in doing so it endorses the ritual slaughter of homosexuals.”

By blocking gay rights initiatives and by declaring that homosexuals are immoral, Kushner insists that Republicans are responsible for Shepard’s death because of how their rhetoric gives legitimacy to those who seek to purify the nation through the murder of homosexuals. For Kushner, Republicans are the Pharisees, the group of Jews who, according to the Gospels, actively campaigned to rid the community of Jesus. To emphasize the connection between Jesus and Shepard, Kushner only refers to Shepard as murdered once, saying he was a “murdered kid”—underscoring his youth and purity—and, instead, refers to Shepard as crucified. He ends his short essay with a series of admonishing repetitions, writing, “may you think about this crucified man [Shepard], and may you support—may you think about this crucified man, and may you mourn, and may you burn with a moral citizen’s shame.”

Kushner, thus, intentionally frames a plea for gay acceptance and for remembering Shepard through well-known Christian tropes in order to appeal to the predominantly Christian nation, even as he circumscribes some forms of Christianity as harmful to gays.

The paralleling of Shepard to Jesus by gay writers and activists did not just occur within magazines and newspapers. After Shepard was attacked, gay playwright, Terrence

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352 Ibid., 4.
McNally, composed a new preface for his off-Broadway play *Corpus Christi* that was given to audience members in their programs. The play is a reimagining of Jesus’ story, and in the preface McNally writes, “arms akimbo in a grotesque crucifixion, he [Shepard] died as agonizing a death as another young man who had been tortured and nailed to a wooden cross at a desolate spot outside Jerusalem known as Golgotha some 1,998 years earlier. They died, as they lived, as brothers.” Here, McNally not only presents Jesus and Shepard’s death as the same, he also enfolds them into a kinship. In saying that they “died, as they lived, as brothers,” McNally is emphasizing that Shepard and Jesus were both outsiders who were murdered for being different. To feel sorrow over Jesus’ death, McNally instructs his audiences, one should also feel anguish over the “crucifixion” of Shepard. Empathy for the murdered gay man is explicitly tied to connecting Shepard with Jesus. McNally never tries to undo Christian dominance. Instead, he uses familiar Christian imagery to evoke compassion for gays. By analogizing Shepard to Jesus and insisting that they were brothers, McNally strategically constructs the gay Matthew Shepard as part of a larger collective that extends beyond gays to include all compassionate Christians.

The “Us” and “Them” of Martyrdom and American Religion

Of the many roles a martyr can play, one of the most common, according to scholars of martyrdom like Candida Moss, is to create a “rupture between ‘us’ and ‘them.’” In other words, a martyr is meant to mark a discursive dividing line separating

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those who support what the martyr theoretically died to uphold, and those who do not. In Shepard’s case a highly visible demarcation of an “us” and “them” occurred outside Shepard’s funeral when the American public witnessed the vitriolic antigay preaching of the Reverend Fred Phelps. In many ways, the media attention given to Phelps’ protest at Shepard’s funeral both promulgated Shepard’s notoriety and allowed Shepard’s supporters to respond in ways that positioned Shepard as the true Christian. In this section I will, therefore, attend to how Shepard marked a dividing line, explore which groups came to be included among the “us” and “them,” and analyze how gay activists situated Shepard as a more legitimate Christian than Phelps or the religious right who, in turn, were depicted not only as an oppositional “them,” but as dangerous Christians.

The Reverend Fred Phelps was introduced to the American public when he traveled with his small congregation from Kansas to Casper, Wyoming so he could picket Shepard’s funeral. This was not the first time Phelps had protested at a gay man’s funeral. He had already picketed the funerals of several gay men who had died from AIDS complications. Phelps and his congregants, for example, protested outside the memorial service for Randy Shilts, author of Harvey Milk’s biography, *The Mayor of Castro Street*. Phelps had also been in the national media prior to Shepard’s murder. He was first mentioned in the *New York Times* in 1993 when the paper reviewed an episode of the television show *20/20* that featured an interview with Phelps about how he was “fighting homosexuality with words.”

Later that same year Phelps appeared on the daytime talk

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show, *Ricki Lake*, in an episode entitled, “Crusades Against Gays.” But Phelps’ infamy was directly connected to Shepard. Outside the church where Shepard had once been an acolyte, Phelps and congregants from his Westboro Baptist Church screamed that Shepard was in Hell. Press from most major news organizations were also in front of the church, as were at least a thousand Shepard supporters who stood outside the memorial service in a brutal snow storm to mourn a man they never knew. CNN had petitioned to broadcast the funeral, as they had with Ryan White’s funeral, but Shepard’s family denied the request. Without direct access to video the service, the media turned its attention to Reverend Phelps’ small congregation of about 15 people and their antigay screaming. In that moment, Shepard as a marker of a dividing line separating those who persecute gays and those who support them quickly came into sharper focus. As the *Washington Post* relates, “scores of mourners formed a line between the demonstrators [from Phelps’ congregation] and the church, linking arms and signing, ‘Amazing Grace.’” Men and women who never knew Shepard but who were moved by his death

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358 Media scholar Thomas Dunn similarly notes that, “Although a thousand people attended Shepard’s funeral, most of the day’s attention was drawn to threats to picket the event from right-wing Christian groups.” See, Thomas R. Donn, “Remembering Matthew Shepard: Violence, Identity, and Queer Counterpublic Memories,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 13, no. 4 (2010): 625.

joined together and sang the hymn “Amazing Grace” with enough gusto to prevent those inside Shepard’s funeral from hearing antigay screaming. While Shepard’s supporters could have done any number of things to drown out the shouting, they chose to use a Christian hymn to combat Phelps. They fought his Christian condemnation of gays with a Christian song of redemption.

Inside the church where Shepard had once been an acolyte, a similar strategy was taking place that positioned Shepard as a legitimate Christian. Shepard’s cousin, an Episcopal Priest, declared that, “Matt is loved by God…love which is more powerful than any voice of hate.” The media’s circulation of rhetoric and images of Shepard as loved by God and committed to Christianity juxtaposed with Phelps waving a Bible and screaming that “God hates fags” gave the appearance that Phelps and his supporters were the abhorrent monsters, not the young, murdered gay man. In a martyrrial dividing line that separated the good “us” from the evil “them,” Phelps’ outspoken attacks on the savagely beaten and docile Shepard marked Phelps as part of an aberrant “them,” and Shepard, in turn, became the true Christian, one of the meek who shall inherit the earth.

The figuration of openly-gay Shepard as the legitimate Christian and the Reverend Fred Phelps as the abomination happened, in part, because, as religion scholar Robert Orsi writes, “The mother of all religious dichotomies—us/Them—has regularly

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360 The hymn “Amazing Grace” was composed in the eighteenth century by Joseph Newton, a Christian pastor.

been constituted as a moral distinction—good/bad religion.”\textsuperscript{362} Put differently, in Shepard marking a dividing line separating “us” and “them,” Phelps’ “them” became a signifier of distorted and inauthentic religion in late twentieth-century America. As Orsi writes, “good” or “true” religion is, “respectful of persons, noncoercive, mature...agreeable to democracy...emotionally controlled.”\textsuperscript{363} In effect, Orsi suggests that what gets regarded as authentic American religion is that which is, or most resembles, white, mainline, Protestant Christianity where screaming is not common, where people are free to make choices and cultivate their own individual relationships with God, and where all are welcome. As opposed to such descriptors of respectable religion, Phelps ranted about “fags” in ways that did not present him as “emotionally controlled.” Similarly, his vitriolic disdain for a sizeable portion of the population did not make him or his church appear “agreeable to democracy.” And as the public learned more about the Westboro Baptist Church, Americans discovered that most of Phelps’ congregants were members of his own family, calling into question if he coerced his children and grandchildren to follow his orders. As opposed to Shepard who was a Christian within a mainline Protestant denomination where his public displays of religion were safely contained to church and the Canterbury Episcopal Student Club, Phelps preached a message of hate from the streets and aggressively denounced all who disagreed with him.


\textsuperscript{363} Ibid., 188.
Prior to Shepard’s funeral, Phelps had been one of many Christian leaders who vociferously condemned gays and, especially, gay men who died from AIDS.\textsuperscript{364} Although Shepard’s death hardly eradicated the religious right’s fixation on homosexuality, his brutal murder combined with images of him as an innocent Protestant youth contributed to many conservative Christian groups explicitly distancing themselves from Phelps’ antigay message. In the martyrrial division of “us” and “them” that concurrently meant “good” and “bad” forms of religion, large conservative Christian groups eagerly ostracized Phelps as part of a bad Other that did not represent authentic Christianity. For example, the Family Research Council, a multi-million dollar conservative Christian organization that actively opposes gay rights, released a press statement saying that, “The Shepard family deserves to be left alone in their time of grief…The Family Research Council deplores Mr. Phelps’ message and tactics, which only serve to crudely caricature Christianity and its basic tenets.”\textsuperscript{365} The Family Research Council aimed to present itself as compassionate by giving Shepard’s family privacy while also insisting that Phelps did not accurately represent a legitimate Christian approach to homosexuality. Their primary concern was that the media would lump them together with Phelps, and so they described him as a “caricature.” Similarly, a week after Shepard’s funeral, the magazine \textit{Christianity Today} published an article saying, “Phelps’s high-profile publicity stunts act as fodder for homosexual-rights activists to portray


Christians as dangerous, crazy, hateful, and irrelevant." The anxiety here was that the public would equate Phelps with all conservative Christians, which could then serve as a rallying call for many straights to unify with gay activists and fight against conservative Christian blockades of pro-gay initiatives. And in some ways their concern had validity. As Michael Cobb argues, public antigay hate speech can serve as a productive means for unifying activism. As an example, the president of PFLAG — Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays — wrote a letter to Mother Jones magazine saying that, “I must say that Fred Phelps actually serves our cause quite well. Every time he speaks and demonstrates, more of those in the ‘movable middle’ of straight American society turn our way.” The media attention that Phelps received for his antigay rhetoric concurrently gave gay activists a platform to respond. And one argument that several gay activists and writers took up after Shepard was attacked was the notion that the religious right was responsible for Shepard’s murder.

The strategy of establishing a causal link between Shepard’s murder and conservative Christian groups was connected to a series of full-page newspaper advertisements that appeared in July 1998, just three months before Shepard was attacked. A coalition of fifteen conservative Christian organizations placed ads in newspapers like the New York Times, the San Francisco Chronicle, and USA Today.


promoting ex-gay ministries. Ex-gay ministries are religious organizations grounded in the conviction that one’s gay sexuality can be converted or sublimated through Christian devotion.\(^{369}\) The coalition dubbed the ads a “Truth in Love” campaign, underscoring the ex-gay philosophy of helping gays and lesbians overcome same-sex desires through “love” and the “truth” of Christ rather than through condemnation or excommunication. The ads received extensive media coverage, igniting national dialogue about ex-gay ministries and about sexuality as something that is fixed or changeable.\(^{370}\) By coincidence, the day after Shepard’s body was found tied to a fence, the same coalition of conservative Christian groups announced that they were going to run television commercials promoting ex-gay ministries. As the Shepard story grew and as representatives from gay activist groups were interviewed about his attack, many made connections between Shepard and the ex-gay ads. For example, the communications director for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force told the Washington Post that, “The direct message in those ads is that gay and lesbian people can change and should change…In other words, gay and lesbian people should not exist. How different is that

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\(^{370}\) Although Shepard is not addressed in their analysis, for a discussion of the “Truth in Love” ads, their media reception, and how the initial response by gay activists groups was reliant on Christian ideas, see Jakobsen and Pellegrini, *Love the Sin*, 80-88. For analysis on the rise of national discussion in the 1990s about sexuality as an “orientation” and something that is fixed, see John D’Emilio, *The World Turned: Essays on Gay History Politics and Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 154-164.
from the thinking of the killers of Matthew Shepard?" \(^{371}\) Where ex-gay ministries had framed their efforts through language of love, gay activists reframed those efforts through language of hate, violence, and death, suggesting that the desire to remove someone’s homosexuality was no different from the desire to kill a homosexual. A writer for *Lesbian News* compared ex-gay efforts to genocide, writing, “While the Christian Coalition does not explicitly advocate genocide for LGBT people, they do so implicitly by urging us to leave our lives of ‘homosexual sin.’ Their efforts manifested in the macabre death in Laramie, Wyoming.” \(^{372}\) And in a cover story for *The Advocate*, a writer pointedly declared that, “Matt Shepard is the ultimate ex-gay,” \(^{373}\) meaning that the goal of ex-gay ministries and Shepard’s murderers was the same: the annihilation of homosexuality.

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Connecting Shepard’s murder to the ex-gay campaign seemed to be a productive tactic that put the “Truth in Love” groups on the defensive. The president of one of the sponsoring organizations issued a press release saying that he “will always abhor violence and hatred directed against homosexuals,” and that, “[m]urderous thugs killed Matthew Shepard, not the millions of pro-family Americans who believe homosexual behavior is wrong.” With distancing language of “thugs,” the group insisted that

Shepard’s murderers were malicious deviants who were in no way similar to the “pro-family Americans” who support ex-gay ideals. Still, the backlash continued, and in December 1998 *Christianity Today* published an editorial entitled, “Who Killed Matthew Shepard?” The editorial unequivocally chastised gay activists for suggesting that Shepard died because of the “Truth in Love” ads. But the editorial also asserted that, “It is not enough simply to point out the inconsistencies in these accusations [that the ex-gay ads contributed to Shepard’s murder]. We need to wrestle with the fact that many people found them credible.”

Thus, the editors of *Christianity Today* were admitting that although speaking out against gays and lesbians had garnered receptive audiences for almost two decades, something about Matthew Shepard was different and conservative Christians were being cast as part of corrupt religion.

Part of what changed was that Matthew Shepard represented someone who was both an avowed Protestant and gay. As opposed to the ex-gay philosophy where one is either a practicing Christian or a practicing homosexual, Shepard’s constructed image presented Americans with the idea that one could be both. After the two decades-long barrage of the religious right’s rhetoric about protecting “family” and the need to “Save our Children,” Matthew Shepard’s family represented one that was loving, Christian, and “all-American.” And the gay movement, so commonly imagined as composed of adult men and women, now had the constructed figure of Matthew – an adolescent – harmed not by predatory homosexuals but by a conservative religious culture that said homosexuality could be annihilated. Shepard’s image was successful in countering the

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ex-gay ads because he was already a committed Christian. In a country that once insisted on “civilizing” the native population through Protestant education, Shepard represented a gay American who was already a civilized Christian citizen. Hardly a godless gay, Shepard was a genteel, practicing Protestant.

A martyrial “us” and “them” line was also made visible with a *Time* magazine cover (Figure 2) that featured a photograph of the fence to which Shepard had been bound and that carried the headline, “The War Over Gays.” The magazine hit newsstands one week after Shepard’s funeral and after the country had been introduced to the Reverend Fred Phelps. The cover also featured a small picture of Shepard smiling and wearing a plaid button down shirt. The wooden fence, however, was unmistakably the cover’s focus. Consequently, the magazine’s language of war juxtaposed with a photograph of the fence suggested that Americans needed to pick a side of the fence, to stand on the side with Shepard or with those who persecuted gays. The accompanying article featured antigay quotes by prominent conservative Christians like Pat Robertson, founder of the Christian Coalition. The picture of the wooden fence on the magazine cover, in this instance, served to evoke not only images of crucifixion and desolate death, but also to mark a dividing line where those Christians who preached against

376 See *Time*, October 26, 1998.

377 Jakobsen and Pellegrini argue that the language of the “war over boys” rather than the “war on gays” rhetorically exempted *Time*’s readers from having to pick a side because most readers would not see themselves resembling Shepard’s murderers or those who actively preach against gays and lesbians. While I find this perspective cogent, I want to make explicit that a discursive logic of sides and of an “us” and “them” was being constructed around Shepard, even if the imagined bad “them” did not include most Americans who harbor antigay or heterosexist sentiments. See Jakobsen and Pellegrini, *Love the Sin*, 53-55.
homosexuality could be considered complicit in violence against gays and, therefore, could be discursively figured as on the same side of the fence as Shepard’s malevolent murderers and the virulent Reverend Fred Phelps.

One final example in which Shepard marked a division between an “us” and “them,” and in ways that were laden with religious imagery of good and evil, was when a group of Shepard’s supporters showed up at Russell Henderson’s murder trial dressed as angels. Henderson’s trial began six months after Shepard’s funeral, and Fred Phelps notified the press that his congregants would picket outside the trial’s courthouse. On the first day of the trial, the Westboro Baptist Church members were ushered into a fenced-off area in front of the courthouse where the authorities required them to stay for the duration of their protest. Since Phelps’ presence was an anticipated one, some of Shepard’s supporters coordinated a counter-protest called “Angel Action.” On the first day of Henderson’s trial, Shepard’s supporters donned white sheets, halos, and massive white wings. After they descended to the courthouse, they stood in front of the fence where Phelps and his congregants were barricaded. Their expansive wings made it nearly impossible for the Westboro Baptist Church’s signs to be visible to the public. The media immediately fixed its attention on the angels. One of the angels addressed the assembled crowd of reporters and spectators and announced, “[W]e bring forth a message—from God, if you will: Love, respect, and compassion for everyone is why we are here today.”378 Phelps had invoked God to justify his actions, and now so had Shepard’s

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supporters, the angels. As Phelps and his congregants shouted antigay slurs, the angels kept completely quiet. Where Phelps preached a gospel of divine judgment and wrath, the angels exhibited the Christian ideal to “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

Cathy Renna, a gay activist who witnessed the day’s Angel Action, said that, “After the Angel Action snatched the media attention from Phelps and took the wind out of his sails, we began to see…diverse faith leaders coming out more and more to counteract his message with one about God’s love.” Thus, on one side of the picket fence stood Phelps and his vitriolic hatred for gays that he grounded in the Bible. On the other side of the fence stood Shepard’s pro-gay supporters dressed as angels, hoping to instill teachings of love and compassion that they grounded in the Bible. They represented opposing perspectives, but Christianity was, again, used as a tool in relation to Shepard to present gays as acceptable. And Angel Action, in turn, became not only an immediate news story, but also a prominently enshrined response to antigay bigotry in what became the most popular and longstanding depiction of Matthew Shepard and his murder: the play The Laramie Project.

Reading Religion in The Laramie Project

Four weeks after Shepard was murdered, nine members of the Tectonic Theater Project, a New York City-based theater group, traveled to Laramie, Wyoming to conduct interviews with the city’s residents about Shepard’s death. Over the span of the next year,

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379 Matthew 5:44

the group made six trips to Laramie and conducted over two hundred interviews. Those interviews, along with court transcripts, news reports, and Tectonic members’ journal entries, provided the content for *The Laramie Project*. The show was constructed as a sort of ethnographic theater piece where actors portray both Laramie residents and members of the Tectonic Theater Project, at times displaying their own reactions to the interviews and to Shepard’s murder. The play opens with a narrator explaining that the show was edited from interviews that will be re-created on stage. The play then proceeds chronologically from before Shepard’s murder to Aaron McKinney’s conviction and sentencing one year later. *The Laramie Project* premiered in Denver, Colorado in February 2000 before moving to an off-Broadway theater in New York City that same year. Since its debut *The Laramie Project* has become one of the most-produced plays in the United States. As an example of its widespread success, between January 2002 and July 2003 *The Laramie Project* was performed by at least 440 American high schools and colleges in addition to nine professional productions in nine different cities. In 2002 a film adaptation of *The Laramie Project* premiered on HBO, thereby allowing millions more to bear witness to Shepard’s story.

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*The Laramie Project*, in many ways, functions as a martyrology to Shepard. For example, the narrative is structured around his violent death, the suffering he endured is described in vivid detail, it depicts Shepard as a model citizen worthy of emulation, and it offers a redemptive ending where Shepard’s murder is framed as life-giving and as a source of transformation for others. In this regard, *The Laramie Project* fulfills a primary function of martyr narratives: to ensure that communities and generations far removed from the martyr’s actual site of death will witness the martyr’s trials and suffering. As discussed in chapter one, the term “martyr” was borrowed from the Greek word *martys*, commonly translated as “witness,” as in a legal witness during a trial. Early Christians transformed the original context of the martyr from one who serves as a witness, to one who is witnessed. As Elizabeth Castelli writes, “The cultural production of Christian martyrdom as performance and spectacle transforms the seer into the seen…And it transforms the readers and consumers of this tradition into uneasy voyeurs of the suffering of others even as it calls them into identification with that suffering.”

Therefore, martyrologies should allow audiences to identify with and feel a special bond with the martyr. In *The Laramie Project* this is achieved not only by describing Shepard in broad, banal descriptors of pleasantness that make him appear incredibly ordinary and likable, but also by omitting Shepard as a character in the play. Although the play recreates his murder, as well as the time leading up to it, Shepard is entirely absent in the show. Audiences are, thus, invited to witness his trauma without being distracted by depictions of an actual gay man. Although the play presents information about Shepard’s

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384 Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 133.
life, none of those details include a boyfriend, sex, or anything that enacts a sexualized gay person. Audiences unfamiliar or uncomfortable with gays are exempted from thinking about how such specificities might distance them from Shepard. In turn, audiences can picture themselves in Shepard’s place, tied to a fence in below-freezing temperatures crying for help with no one in sight except for two malicious murderous. And for audiences who might assume that the location of Shepard’s murder, Laramie, is different from the rest of the country, one member of the Tectonic Theater Project says early in the show, “Just past the ‘Welcome to Laramie’ sign – ‘Population 26,687’ – the first thing to greet us was Wal-Mart. In the dark, we could be on any drag in America.”

Although *The Laramie Project* names its focus to a specific geographic area, the play is composed so that Shepard’s murder could have taken place anywhere. Laramie becomes every-town USA, and Shepard becomes, as in so many news reports, the all-American kid.

*The Laramie Project* was not produced under the auspices of a religious organization, nor did the writers, led by gay Jewish playwright, Moisés Kaufman, claim a religious understanding of Shepard’s murder; but religious themes, specifically Christian motifs, pervade the play. American Studies scholar, Scott Hoffman, similarly notes that, “Issues of religion, however, consistently appear in the interviews selected by Tectonic.”

Although *The Laramie Project* is presented as a sort of documentary-style

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show replete with actual interviews, the play is nevertheless highly constructed. The writers had to make choices about what material to include, which quotes to use, and how to craft a narrative. In *The Laramie Project*, as in so many essays and news features about him, the appeal to empathize with the gay Matthew Shepard is constructed through Christian tropes. I am, therefore, going to offer an analysis of *The Laramie Project* that primarily examines the play’s religious motifs to illustrate how Christian theological ideas frame what has become the most popular and enduring narrative representation of Matthew Shepard.\(^{387}\)

Rather than situate Shepard’s murder as a random act of violence, *The Laramie Project*, like *The Advocate*, presents Shepard’s murder within a framework of redemptive sacrifice where his death immediately transformed society. For instance, a gay man living in Laramie describes watching the town’s annual homecoming parade the week after Shepard was attacked. Laramie residents marched in support of Shepard at the back of the parade, and the man was deeply moved when he saw that the number of people marching for Shepard outnumbered all those in the homecoming parade. The character says, “Tears were streaming down my face. I thought, ‘Thank God that I got to see this in

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my lifetime. And my second thought was, ‘Thank you, Matthew.’\footnote{Kaufman, The Laramie Project, 63-64.} From all of their interviews, the play’s writers selected a gay man who both praises God and, importantly, who suggests that the assault on Shepard transformed his town. Shepard is thanked for giving his life for a greater, collective good even though he did not choose to die. A capricious act of violence is transmuted into a redemptive reawakening. Moments later in the show, the character of Father Roger Shmit, a Roman Catholic priest, similarly proclaims, “Matthew Shepard has served us well. You realize that? He has served us well…I cannot mention anyone who has done more for this community than Matthew Shepard.”\footnote{Ibid., 65.} No one, audiences are told, has contributed as much to Laramie as Shepard. But Shepard did not actually do anything. Something horrendous was done to him. By placing the locus of agency with Shepard, his violent murder becomes less of an abysmal tragedy and more of a meaningful moment where lives were changed for the better. From this perspective, McKinney and Henderson were not successful in annihilating Shepard even though they murdered him. As religion scholar, Kent Brintnall, observes, “This strategy—always connecting suffering to triumph, victimization to victory, ordeal to overcoming—is a script borrowed from the Christian imaginary.”\footnote{Kent Brintnall, Ecce Homo: The Male Body in Pain as a Redemptive Figure (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 63.} The Laramie Project is, therefore, engaged in a Christian meaning-making strategy where victory resides with Shepard even though he was violently killed.
*The Laramie Project* further demonstrates the idea that Shepard defeated death by opening the third act with Christian liturgy of resurrection. Shepard dies near the end of the second act, and the third act begins with Shepard’s funeral. An unnamed priest says, “The liturgy today is an Easter liturgy. It finds its meaning in the resurrection.”391 The priest continues by repeatedly emphasizing resurrection, saying, “For our brother, Matthew, let us pray to our Lord Jesus Christ, who said, ‘I am the Resurrection and the life.’ We pray to the Lord…You raised the dead to life: give our brother eternal life.”392 On one level, the inclusion of resurrection language serves as a suggestion that death can be redeemed. In Christian theology, Christ was not destroyed by death because he rose to eternal life. As Kent Brintnall also observes, “Images and narratives of resurrection are the primary mechanism for reframing the meaning of suffering and injury.”393 By jumping from Shepard’s death at the end of the second act to resurrection rhetoric at the start of the third act, the Tectonic writers place Shepard within an overt Christian framework where death signifies not defeat but the promise of eternal glory. Additionally, by including familiar Christian liturgy, Shepard is depicted as a practicing Protestant, as a gay member of Christ’s collective body welcomed into church and heaven. Interspersed with Shepard’s funeral in *The Laramie Project* are moments of the Reverend Fred Phelps preaching damnation for Shepard and gays, thereby juxtaposing Phelps’ antigay tirades with a more widely-respected style of Protestant worship. And

391 Kaufman, *The Laramie Project*, 75.

392 Ibid., 76-77.

393 Brintnall, *Ecce Homo*, 60.
similar to the day of Shepard’s actual funeral, in *The Laramie Project* a chorus comes
together on stage to sing the hymn “Amazing Grace,” which drowns out Phelps’ shouting
and presents Shepard as the authentic Christian.

Weaving throughout the play are discussions of how God brings comfort and
solace, especially to Shepard. For example, the college student who found Shepard tied to
the fence says in the show’s first act, “I didn’t know where I was going. I was just sort of
picking the way to go, which now…it just makes me think that God wanted me to find
him because there’s no way that I was going to go that way.”394 The play’s writers do not
let the question of why God wanted Shepard found to go unanswered. In the second act
the same character once again asks, “The big question with me, like with my religion, is
like Why did God want ME to find him?”395 In the third act, near the end of the show, the
character gives his answer, saying, “It just hit me today the minute that I got out of the
courthouse. That the reason that God wanted me to find him is, for he didn’t have to die
out there alone, you know.”396 By continually returning to a question of why God wanted
this person to find Shepard, *The Laramie Project* inserts God throughout the show in a
way that allows God to appear as a compassionate source of relief and comfort, and not
as the cause of Shepard’s murder. In other words, repeatedly questioning why God
wanted that student to find Shepard is significantly different from questioning why God
caused Shepard to be violently tortured, which does not happen in the play. In *The

394 Ibid., 35.

395 Ibid., 52, original emphasis.

396 Ibid., 97.
The Laramie Project no character suggests that God is responsible for Shepard’s murder, only his relief. God is, thus, exonerated from culpability in Shepard’s attack and is credited for Shepard not dying alone. To further underscore this idea, The Laramie Project quotes a portion of the speech that Shepard’s father gave on the day of McKinney’s sentencing. The Tectonic writers selected from that long speech the assertion that as his son was tied to a fence, “He had one more friend with him. He had God. And I [Shepard’s father] feel better knowing he wasn’t alone.”397 The Laramie Project implies through this quotation, through dialogue comparing Shepard’s death to Christ’s, and through references to resurrection, that the God present with Christ during his crucifixion and resurrection was also present during Shepard’s suffering. The stitched together and constructed dialogue, thus, attempts to facilitate empathy for Shepard through motifs of the country’s dominant religion.

The Tectonic writers selected a few additional sections of the speech given by Shepard’s father that work well with the play’s emphasis on redemptive sacrifice. For instance, his father insists, “Good is coming out of evil,”398 meaning, again, that in spite of Shepard’s degrading death, justice ultimately ensues and good triumphs. The Tectonic writers also included a portion of the speech where he invokes Shepard as giving life. In explaining the decision not to seek the death penalty for Aaron McKinney, Shepard’s father says that “this is the time to begin the healing process. To show mercy to someone who refused to show any mercy. Mr. McKinney, I am going to grant you life, as hard as it

397 Ibid., 95.

398 Ibid., 96.
is for me to do so, because of Matthew.” He concludes by directly addressing McKinney and saying, “Mr. McKinney, I give you life in the memory of one who no longer lives. May you have a long life and may you thank Matthew every day for it.”

The inclusion of these lines fit with the play’s narrative of Shepard as like Jesus. As with Christ who is considered to have died so that others may live, Shepard is invoked as the source of giving McKinney life so that he may repent for his sins. Shepard, in turn, does not appear vengeful. Rather than seeking death for those who murdered him, he has turned the other cheek and granted life.

The show explicitly compares Shepard to Jesus when a Unitarian minister describes the fence to which Shepard was bound. While the play’s writers could have selected any number of interviews or quotes to describe the fence for audiences who have never seen it, the one chosen for the play was one in which a visual connection between Shepard and Jesus was made explicit. The character says that the fence “has become a pilgrimage site…you can’t help but think of Matthew there for eighteen hours in nearly freezing temperatures with that view up there isolated, and, the ‘God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ comes to mind.” The reference to “God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” is from the Gospels of Matthew and Mark where Jesus cries out on the cross. The minister, as in so many writings about Shepard, presents the association between the crucifixion and the site of Shepard’s murder as obvious and axiomatic. In the

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399 Ibid., 96.

400 Ibid., 96.

401 Ibid., 34.
predominantly Christian United States, the story of Christ’s crucifixion is one most Americans already know well. And in *The Laramie Project*, as with multiple essays and news features about him, the appeal to empathize with the gay Matthew Shepard is constructed through this association. Soon after the minister’s crucifixion comparison, a Tectonic member describes his first visit to the fence by saying that, “a friend of Matthew’s took us to the fence this morning. I broke down the minute I touched it. I feel such a strong kinship with this young man.”

Here, the fence is presented as an extraordinary sacred space where one can experience Shepard’s presence. The Tectonic member declares a “kinship” with Shepard, someone he never knew in life but who, in death, he feels he knows well.

One important function of early Christian martyr narratives, according to scholars like Vasiliki Limberis, was that they “personalized Christianity,” meaning that one could gain a better understanding of Christianity through learning about the martyrs. I would, therefore, like to briefly examine how Shepard is described in *The Laramie Project* since the show has made him a public representation of a gay American. The first time Shepard is mentioned in the play is by a police sergeant who simply says, “Now, when the incident happened with that boy, a lot of press came here.” Shepard is, thus, first presented as a “boy.” As discussed earlier, children are commonly imagined as

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402 Ibid., 34.


innocents, so audiences who may feel uncomfortable with gays and lesbians are immediately told that Shepard was a “boy” and not an adult gay man. *The Laramie Project* proceeds to depict Shepard in ways that only allow him to be an obviously likable and innocent figure. For instance, Romaine Patterson, initiator of “Angel Action,” describes Shepard early in the show by saying, “And whenever I think of Matthew, I always think of his incredible beaming smile…he’d smile at everyone…he just made you feel great.” Likewise, the bartender at the Fireside Lounge, one of the last people to see Shepard before he went off with Henderson and McKinney, says, “[W]hat can I tell you about Matt? If you had a hundred customers like him it’d be the – the most perfect bar I’ve ever been in. Okay? And nothing to do with sexual orientation. Um, absolute mannerisms. Manners. Politeness, intelligence.” Here, the play’s writers have selected a description of Shepard that serves both to remind audiences that Shepard was gay while concurrently presenting him as the ideal person, as nearly perfect. His gayness gets figured as incidental. Instead, his pleasant, warm, and intelligent character frames him as someone deserving of the audience’s compassion. In fact, the only characters in *The Laramie Project* who speak ill of Shepard are depicted as obviously homophobic. For instance, the wife of a highway patrolman who had never met Shepard says, “[T]here’s just so many things about him that I found out that I just, it’s scary. You know about his character and spreading AIDS…And I think he pushed himself around. I think he

405 Ibid., 19, original ellipses from the script with no omitted dialogue.

406 Ibid., 29.
flaunted it.”\(^{407}\) As opposed to the bartender’s descriptions, here Shepard’s sexuality is at the fore and is immediately associated with sexual aggression and spreading AIDS. Discussions of Shepard as a sexual being in *The Laramie Project* are, thus, relegated to the diatribe of an antigay character so that Shepard can remain a nearly universally-recognizable innocent figure. Having sex and boyfriends should not, of course, make Shepard less likable or his murder less heinous. But *The Laramie Project* never attempts to present audiences with how a sexually-active Shepard could be worthy of their empathy or admiration.

Another way in which Shepard is constructed as an ideal person is by how he is juxtaposed with his killers who are immediately depicted as abominations. The first description audiences hear about Henderson and McKinney portray Shepard and his attackers as nearly point-by-point opposites. The same bartender who describes Shepard as the perfect patron immediately compares him to Henderson and McKinney, saying, “They walk in, just very stone-faced, you know. Dirty. Grungy. Rude. ‘Gimme.’ That type of thing. They walked up to the bar, uh, and as you know, paid for a pitcher with dimes and quarters…That’s a freakin’ nightmare.”\(^{408}\) As opposed to Shepard who audiences are told approached everyone with a “beaming smile,” the killers were “stone-faced.” Where Shepard had “manners” and “politeness,” McKinney and Henderson were “dirty” and “rude.” A bar full of people like Shepard would be the “most perfect bar,” as opposed to the “freakin’ nightmare” occupied by his assailants. Shepard’s killers are, thus,

\(^{407}\) Ibid., 64.

\(^{408}\) Ibid., 29-30.
represented as backwoods delinquents. They are clearly bad, which contributes to Shepard appearing all the more virtuous. In such narrow constructions of good and evil, a common feature of martyrlogies, *The Laramie Project* runs the risk of letting audiences understand Henderson and McKinney’s attack on Shepard as symptomatic of their already deviant lives rather than on how antigay attitudes circulate widely in America.  

A final way in which *The Laramie Project* relies on religious motifs is by presenting audiences with a conversion. As Tertullian proffered, “The blood of martyrs is the seed of the church,” suggesting that martyr tales are meant to proselytize. Related, *The Laramie Project* invites audiences to witness a conversion among one of its characters, not to Christianity, but to acceptance of gay Americans. The character’s conversion serves as a model for how the writers likely hope to convert those audience members who, prior to watching the production, were not accepting of gays and lesbians. The character, Jedadiah Schultz, says in the second act, “I don’t agree with it [homosexuality] but—maybe that’s just because I couldn’t do it—and speaking in

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409 Communications scholars Brian Ott and Eric Aoki make a similar observation about how Henderson and McKinney were depicted in the media. They write that, “As time passed, Shepard’s attackers became ever more alienated from the public. They were uneducated, drug addicted, career animals who had maliciously sought out their victim because he was gay.” See Brian Ott and Eric Aoki, “The Politics of Negotiating Public Tragedy: Media Framing of the Matthew Shepard Murder,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 5, no. 3 (2002): 492.


religious terms—I don’t think that’s how God intended it to happen.” But near the end of the show, after audiences have heard about the amicable Matthew Shepard, his gruesome murder, and the conviction of his killers who confessed that they targeted Shepard because he was gay, Schultz says to a gay member of Tectonic, “I just can’t believe I ever said that stuff about homosexuals, you know. How did I ever let that stuff make me think that you were different from me?” Schultz represents those in the audience who have been raised in settings where they have been told that homosexuality is wrong. And after having witnessed Shepard’s story, The Laramie Project presents audiences with a convert, someone who is more accepting of “homosexuals” because of the dead Matthew Shepard. Schultz’s conversion is even surrounded by angels figuratively guiding him to a new acceptance of gays. In the first act, audiences learn that Schultz is attending the University of Wyoming on a theater scholarship after he gave an award-winning performance in Tony Kushner’s Angels in America. In the third act, he is part of the University’s staging of Angels in America that was performed as a response to Shepard’s murder. Schultz proclaims his converted perspective after participating in that performance. The play’s focus on angels also occurs when Shepard’s supporters dress up for a re-creation of “Angel Action” and encircle the Reverend Fred Phelps. The angels in The Laramie Project demonstrate the idea that righteousness is on Shepard’s side, and the play’s writers surely hoped audiences would leave The Laramie Project, like Jedadiah Schultz, converted by bearing witness to Shepard’s story. As with so many other writings

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412 Kaufman, The Laramie Project, 57.

413 Ibid., 98.
composed about Shepard, Christian motifs permeate the narrative in *The Laramie Project*, giving Christianity a primary role in maintaining Shepard’s legacy and in arguing for acceptance of gay Americans.

Matthew Shepard’s Ongoing Legacy

*The Laramie Project* is one of many narrative representations about Shepard that have proliferated since his death. He has been the focus of television movies, books, poetry, museum exhibits, a documentary, and more than fifty songs.\(^{414}\) Some depictions, especially his mother’s memoir, have tried to create a more robust picture of Shepard, someone fully human and not reduced to a perfect adolescent. But in many ways, Christian motifs remain a recurrent theme throughout many of these additional representations. In this section I will briefly analyze some twenty-first century portrayals of Shepard, as well as how his death has been figured as an ongoing legacy for the United States. Ultimately, twenty-first century representations of Shepard have also relied on Christian ideas in order to arouse empathy for him and to present him as similar to the dominant class of white, straight Protestants. In turn, Protestant Christianity’s dominance in the US has been reinforced through repeated reliance on Christian ideas to present Shepard, and gays with him, as acceptable in America.

The first of three television movies about Shepard, MTV’s *Anatomy of a Hate Crime: The Matthew Shepard Story*, premiered in January 2001 and opens with a

voiceover by an actor playing Shepard saying, “Things don’t just happen. There are always reasons. After I died people said a lot of things about me.” The movie, thus, commences with a posthumous Shepard preaching that “there are always reasons” for the things that happen. Immediately, Anatomy of a Hate Crime insists that Shepard’s death has meaning. Moreover, the narration that “things don’t just happen” places Shepard’s murder within a logic of sacrifice and redemption. Although not named as an explicitly Christian idea when Americans utter this sentiment, the assertion that everything happens for a reason is a secularized version of the Christian theological concept of redemptive suffering, thereby cloaking a Christian idea as a common sense American assumption.

Rather than embracing randomness or acknowledging capricious violence, the insistence that “there are always reasons” gives turmoil purpose and colors the horrific with a sense that it has reason. As Judith Perkins illustrates in her work on early Christianity, a chief feature of Christian martyr stories was to offer “a useful function for pain and a structure for understanding human suffering,” in ways that instructed audiences to see how pain can have a purpose. Anatomy of a Hate Crime denies that Shepard’s murder was only a terrible tragedy and avers that it was a moment full of meaning.

More than most representations of Shepard, Anatomy of a Hate Crime offers an extensive portrayal of Shepard’s murderers, Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney. Henderson is depicted as sweet, but from a broken home with an alcoholic mother.


McKinney is shown working blue-collar jobs and blowing through an inheritance to pay for drugs. Gradually, Henderson becomes more immersed in McKinney’s world of drugs, crime, and violence. They bond over being high school drop outs, but seem perpetually bored and with few options for social Mobility. Shepard, in contrast, is portrayed as a successful college student surrounded by friends. In one scene, Shepard’s friends gather at his apartment where he sermonizes about making the world a better place. The film also presents Shepard as intellectually sophisticated, outshining all other students. In actuality, Shepard struggled in school and suffered from learning disorders that were not diagnosed until his late teenage years. By inventing a story of academic exception, the movie instills the idea that Shepard was clearly different from his murderers who could not even finish high school. Thereafter, *Anatomy of a Hate Crime* largely follows the chronology of Shepard’s attack, Henderson and McKinney’s confessions, and McKinney’s trial one year later. In the movie’s final scene, Shepard stands in front of the wooden fence where he had been bound and says directly into the camera, “Don’t forget me.” Having opened the movie by insisting that his murder had purpose, the film concludes with a posthumous Shepard, like the resurrected Jesus, instructing his audience to become his apostles and to preach his story.

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Two additional television movies about Shepard premiered in March 2002. The first was HBO’s treatment of *The Laramie Project*. The second was NBC’s *The Matthew Shepard Story*. As a writer for the *Village Voice* observed about the timing of the two films, “There’s no reason why these two movies should overlap; the murder occurred in October of 1998, so there’s no anniversary to observe. But it can’t be coincidental that both films are being shown in the shadow of Good Friday and Easter Sunday.”

The *Village Voice* writer had obviously noticed that Shepard’s story is recurrently reenacted with religious imagery of sacrificial death, resurrection, and with analogies to Jesus. In fact, the opening scenes of *The Matthew Shepard Story* make the connection between Shepard and Jesus explicitly clear. The film begins with the torture and murder of Shepard; his death becomes the genesis of the narrative. The violent images in the opening scene are distorted, but what emerges as visually clear is Shepard’s arms outstretched on a wooden fence in a crucified position. In the movie’s second scene, a female police officer rushes to Shepard’s side. The camera focuses on Shepard’s face, which, as reported by the actual first responder, was completely covered in blood except for where tears had streamed down from under his eyes. As the camera pans out over a Wyoming prairie, the Christian hymn “For the Beauty of the Earth” plays and concludes with the line, “this our sacrifice of praise.” Within the first two scenes, the film presents Shepard as a “sacrifice” who, like the weeping Christ, was crucified.

Habitually structuring Shepard’s murder as a sacrifice places Shepard within a familiar Christian narrative while also suggesting that he died so other gays could have a

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better life. In Christian thought, Jesus died, or was sacrificed, to save humanity. Shepard-as-sacrifice can similarly be conceived as a saving death necessary for gays to count as full citizens. He died so that others may more fully live. Religion scholar, Jodi Eichler-Levine, has written on how the motif of sacrificed children has been common in both Jewish American and African American literature, and of how writers have presented their communities as fully American through narratives of sacrificed adolescents. She writes, “This sacrificial logic drives a Protestant metanarrative of redemptive citizenship that grafts Jews and blacks fully onto Americanness through the loss of their children.”

The deaths of murdered Jewish, black, or gay adolescents get redeemed when Jews, blacks, or gays are imagined, or imagine themselves, as having gained greater entrée into American citizenship because of the deaths of particular youth. Christian concepts, in turn, remain hegemonic because of how ideas about how to matter to the nation are connected to Christian idioms of sacrifice and redemption.

Aside from the movie’s overt religious themes, The Matthew Shepard Story mostly focuses on Shepard’s parents, how they came to accept his sexuality, and how they handled his death and the ensuing court cases. The family is presented as typical, and Shepard as the average American son. In one scene Shepard and his dad go hunting together, presenting Shepard as similar to all boys even though he turns out to be gay. In a later scene Shepard is asked if he is rich because he lived in Saudi Arabia. He responds by saying, “Hardly. It’s my dad’s job.” The Shepards are, thus, depicted as a regular,

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420 Eichler-Levine, Suffer the Little Children, 94.

421 The Matthew Shepard Story, directed by Roger Spottiswoode (2002; NBC).
middle-class, mainstream, American family. And, as in most narrative depictions of him, the movie also presents Shepard within religious imagery of purity and goodness. For instance, Shepard comes home one day to find that his neighbor graffitied his apartment door with “Get Out Fag.” Shepard does not retaliate. Instead, he gives the neighbor a glass angel, thereby connecting Shepard to the theme of angels and the Christian idea of “turn the other cheek” yet again. In this regard, Shepard is not just analogized to Christ in *The Matthew Shepard Story*; he is also depicted as a gay American who lived the ideals of Christianity.

In 2009 Shepard’s mother published a memoir about her son’s death, *The Meaning of Matthew: My Son’s Murder in Laramie, and a World Transformed*. More than most other representations of Shepard, his mother’s is not hagiography. She says

> Another memoir that attempts to present Shepard as fully human is *The Whole World Was Watching: Living in the Light of Matthew Shepard*, by Romaine Patterson, the creator of “Angel Action.” The book is peppered with religious idioms, but it also presents information about Shepard that develops his humanity. For example, Patterson reveals that Shepard loved to smoke pot. She also describes his battles with depression, dating problems, concerns with appearing attractive, desire to find a church community, and his ability to talk to strangers for hours at the coffee shop where she waitressed. Throughout the book Patterson frequently references Shepard’s “light.” Her religious reverence for him peaks after she conceived “Angel Action,” when she gathers the angels and prays directly to Shepard. Near the end of the book Patterson wonders if Shepard’s parents will “be able to see that while Matthew Shepard has been taken from his family and friends at that fence, it was at the same place where he had been given to the world” (229). Patterson, thus, frames Shepard’s murder as an offering that Shepard’s parents could conceivably appreciate, a sacrificial death for the world reminiscent of John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son.” This biblical passage is meant to model Christian selfless love. God let his son die so that the world could be saved, and Patterson similarly hopes that Shepard’s parents will come to see their son’s death as a gift “given to the world.” See Romaine Patterson, *The Whole World Was Watching: Living in the Light of Matthew Shepard* (New York: Advocate Books, 2005).
early on that, “You knew him as Matthew. To us he was Matt,” suggesting that the revered “Matthew Shepard” was someone created in death and who was different from the son she raised and loved. While she dedicates time to depicting Shepard as a typical boy who liked Dr. Seuss and camping with his dad, she also reveals darker periods in his life. In particular, she says that he was never the same after he was raped in Morocco. She describes his ensuing battles with depression and anxiety, and her concern that he contributed to his own depression by regularly consuming alcohol when he took psychotropic medications.

Much of the book focuses on what happened after Shepard was attacked in Laramie. The attention given to her son’s murder initially confused and annoyed his mother. She wanted nothing to do with the press and had no idea that vigils were taking place all over the country with thousands of people in mourning. Slowly, she began to read letters from those who wrote to her family about why Shepard’s murder meant so much to them. Throughout the book she offers a few theories about why her son garnered mass appeal, ultimately suggesting that, “[I]t wasn’t so much the details of Matt’s life, or even the tragedy of his death, that drove many of these individuals to write. For most of them, it was the fact that my family was the first they could identify with.” Here, she makes the observation that Shepard, in being portrayed as a youth, was understood as part of a family with two loving parents, an image that had not been common in the history of

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424 Ibid., 263.
American gay rights. As John D’Emilio writes, “Because the public representation of gay life in the 1970s and early 1980s emphasized freestanding adult males in an urban subculture, it preserved the stereotypical – and oppressive – boundary between homosexuality and a world of children and families.” The common image of gays and lesbians, in other words, was that they were isolated adults separated from nuclear family structures. But Shepard was seen as part of a family, a Protestant family that loved him and that accepted his sexuality. His mother further reveals she and her husband received “tens of thousands of cards, letters, and emails” in the weeks after Shepard died. The letters were not just condolence notes. Many included money, “much of it in five- and ten-dollar bills,” that added up to nearly ninety thousand dollars. The Shepards, in turn, started the Matthew Shepard Foundation, an organization dedicated to promoting acceptance of gay Americans. Judy Shepard admits in the book that prior to her son’s funeral she had never heard of the Human Rights Campaign, the country’s largest lobbying organization for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Americans. But she quickly educated herself on pertinent issues. By 2009 she had given speeches about Matthew and issues facing gays and lesbians to more than a million people. And while she never, by any means, suggests that she is thankful that her son died, she does indicate that his death was part of a larger plan. She writes that, “it felt like all of us—including

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425 D’Emilio, *The World Turned*, 188.


427 Ibid., 194.

Matt, McKinney, and Henderson—were pieces in a big board game, being moved around by some higher power.”\textsuperscript{429} Even though Shepard’s mother eschews deification of her son, she nevertheless proposes that her son’s murder had a purpose and that she too is part of a cosmic plan connected to her son’s death.

Shepard’s ongoing legacy has not been limited to narrative representations. A federal hate crimes bill bearing his name became law eleven years after he was murdered. One of the bill’s initial sponsors, a Mormon republican from Oregon, said that, “By putting his [Shepard’s] face on the bill, I believe we’ll be more successful [because his story is] compelling to the heart.”\textsuperscript{430} Shepard’s name was added to the proposed bill in 2007, but the legislation once again failed to pass through Congress. In 2009 the bill was renamed The Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act. James Byrd Jr. was a 49-year-old African American man who had been killed a few months prior to Shepard by three white men who tied him to a truck and dragged him, while conscious, along an asphalt road until his head severed. The inclusion of Byrd in the naming of the bill underscored that hate crimes legislation was not just about adding protections for LGBT Americans, but also for those who were targeted because of racial and ethnic hate. Among other things, the bill that was signed into law by President Obama required the FBI to track crimes against transgender people, and it granted federal authorities the right to intervene on all alleged hate crimes where local police did not properly investigate. That Shepard’s name was used for the bill eleven years after his

\textsuperscript{429} Shepard, \textit{The Meaning of Matthew}, 161.

\textsuperscript{430} Gordon Smith quoted in “Lawmakers Name Hate Crimes Bill After Matthew Shepard,” \textit{Gay and Lesbian Times} (San Diego, CA), April 19, 2007.
death suggests that he has remained the most visible symbol of antigay violence in the United States.\textsuperscript{431}

The Spectacle of Martyrdom: Counter-Perspectives on Matthew Shepard

Although Shepard has been described by many as a martyr, the attention given to his death has invited others to discredit him as someone unworthy of empathy or emulation. I am not simply referring to those like the Reverend Fred Phelps who might condemn any gay American who received praise. Rather, I am addressing how exaltation of Shepard has also produced counter-narratives that have attempted to strip him of his iconic status. The circulation of opposing perspectives fits squarely within the martyrrial tradition. As Castelli writes, “Martyrs are, then, objects of awe and reverence at some moments, of suspicion and derision at others. They can inspire loyalty and conversion, scorn and contempt. Martyrs inspire anxiety, fear, and loathing.”\textsuperscript{432} Martyrs, in other words, produce a range of responses. The repeated and relived spectacle of their deaths invite multiple interpretations. Because martyrs can be a source for legitimating power, uniting communities, and for galvanizing activism, martyrs can also be seen as

\textsuperscript{431} The continued invocation of Shepard and of references to his legacy have persisted into the second decade of the twenty-first century. For instance, in 2013 Jason Collins, the first professional basketball player to come out as gay, revealed that he had been wearing jersey number 98, a reference to the year Shepard died, during his NBA games as a quiet tribute to Shepard before he had the courage to come out. See Jason Collins, “Why NBA Center Jason Collins is Coming Out Now,” \textit{Sports Illustrated}, May 6, 2013. For examples of additional cultural representations of Shepard, see see Lesléa Newman, \textit{October Mourning: A Song for Matthew Shepard} (York, PA: Candlewick Press, 2013). See, also, a review of the musical, \textit{Matthew’s Passion}, Anne Midgette, “Connecting Theater to Sexuality and Faith,” \textit{New York Times} (New York, NY), April 5, 2007. And to read about an exhibit of the letters sent to Shepard’s parents at Ford’s Theater in D.C., see “Not Alone: The Power of Response,” last modified December 8, 2013, \url{http://www.fordstheatre.org/event/not-alone-power-response}.

\textsuperscript{432} Castelli, \textit{Martyrdom and Memory}, 199.
threatening and dangerous to the social order. While the dominant perspective of Shepard has been of him as an innocent childlike victim, counter-perspectives continue to circulate. These counter-narratives are not replete with religious motifs, likely because they are attempts to disentangle Shepard from Christ-like images of innocence. However, in this section I will briefly present the most prominent counter-narratives of Shepard to illustrate how Shepard’s martyrdom has been reliant on narrow constructions of innocence that delimit how to matter to the American nation.

In 2004 the television show 20/20 aired an episode about Matthew Shepard’s murder that challenged the prevailing narrative of his death. Rather than an antigay hate crime, the 20/20 episode presented the idea that Shepard’s death was a drug-induced robbery gone awry. According to the narrative constructed by the show’s producers, Shepard had not been killed because he was gay, but because the murderers were high on crystal methamphetamines. In a violation of their sentencing agreement that had restricted them from meeting with the press, Henderson and McKinney were interviewed for the show’s hour-long segment. During those separately taped interviews, both men recanted their original confessions and claimed that the murder was fueled by drugs and not hatred of gays. Six years after the murder and their initial “gay panic”-style defense, the two men insisted that they had hoped to rob a drug dealer the night of Shepard’s murder but that they were unable to execute their original plan. Frustrated, they turned their focus to Shepard who they spotted at the Fireside Lounge and who they described as “an easy mark.” McKinney said that he and Henderson assumed Shepard had plenty of money. After approaching him, McKinney offered the inebriated Shepard a ride home so he would not have to drive drunk. They robbed him soon after they drove away from the
bar. When asked why he proceeded to attack Shepard, McKinney claimed that he was coming down from a crystal methamphetamine binge that caused him to go out of control. He said, “Sometimes when you have that kind of rage going through you, there’s no stopping it. I’ve attacked my best friends coming off of meth binges.”

McKinney’s reframing of his confession switched the motivation behind the nights’ violence from Shepard’s sexuality to McKinney’s drug problem. When specifically asked if he assaulted Shepard because he was gay, McKinney answered by saying, “No. I did not…I would say it wasn’t a hate crime. All I wanted to do was beat him up and rob him.”

McKinney had not, in fact, been convicted of a hate crime. Wyoming did not have hate crime laws in 1998. But in the American court of public opinion, McKinney had been convicted of killing Shepard because he was gay. One reason Shepard’s murder was initially framed as an antigay crime was because McKinney’s girlfriend, Kristen Price, told the press that McKinney attacked Shepard after he made a pass at him. But like McKinney and Henderson, by 2004 Price also recanted her original confession. In her interview with 20/20, Price claimed that she “thought things would go easier for McKinney if his violence were seen as a panic reaction to an unwanted gay sexual advance.”

Price asserted that her original confession was intended to evoke sympathy for McKinney. She had presumed that the police, press, and prosecutors would consider


434 Ibid.

assaulting a gay guy who hit on straight men a reasonable reaction, or, at least, a more respectable reaction than attacking someone so small because of a crystal meth-induced murderous rage.

As a way to examine some of the ways that the 20/20 perspective gained traction, I am going to turn to the play *The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later*. A decade after Shepard’s murder, members of the Tectonic Theater Project returned to Laramie to see how the town’s residents had changed as a result of Shepard’s death and the national focus on antigay violence. McKinney and Henderson were also interviewed for the production. As with the original play, a script was crafted from edited interviews and from Tectonic member journal entries. *The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later* premiered on October 12, 2009, the eleventh anniversary of Shepard’s death, to a massive cross-country audience. The play was performed simultaneously in 150 theaters in all fifty states with 50,000 people watching the show on opening night.436

One of the first things audiences learn when watching *The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later* is that Laramie residents, or at least many of those selected for the play’s script, would prefer never to discuss Matthew Shepard again. One character says early in the show that, “This [Shepard’s murder] was all anyone talked about in terms of what Laramie is and Wyoming is. There was, I think, a palpable sense here in Laramie of just, ‘Let’s stop talking about this, please. Let’s return to business as usual.'”437 But as the

436 Information about the opening night was obtained from the “Author’s Note” in the published version of the play. See Moisés Kaufman, *The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later* (New York: Dramatists Play Service Inc., 2012), 6.

play progresses, many Laramie residents appear not only fatigued by talk of Shepard; they are also convinced that the murder was not about his sexuality. For example, the editor of the town’s newspaper is quoted as saying, “I really believe they wanted money. And Matthew didn’t have what they thought and it just escalated to an anger that was totally out of control. There was so much speculation about drug use. I just don’t think it was about his sexuality.”\(^{438}\) The 2004 episode of 20/20 is mentioned as a primary reason why many Laramie residents no longer believe the crime was motivated by antigay hate. Other residents, mainly gay citizens and the police officers who worked the case, are presented as profoundly disturbed by the 20/20 episode and the reframing of Shepard’s murder from one about sexuality to one about drugs. They argue that Laramie residents were so tired of being associated with an antigay hate crime that they were willing to ignore the initial confessions and all the evidence from the trials so their town would no longer carry the stigma of producing homophobic murderers. For example, a lesbian faculty member at the University of Wyoming says, “So we are the state of Matthew Shepard…and as ten years have gone on, people resent it—people resent that they are from the place where ‘that gay kid was killed.’”\(^{439}\)

Although *The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later* depicts Laramie residents with counter-perspectives on Shepard’s murder, the Tectonic writers nevertheless construct the play so that those opposing perspectives do not get the final word. As Brad Gregory

\(^{438}\) Ibid., 19.

\(^{439}\) Ibid., 48.
declares, composers of martyr narratives are “overt propagandists,” meaning that they have an agenda and are not impartial. The continued success of *The Laramie Project* is on condition that Shepard remain an innocent victim of an antigay murder. Thus, *The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later* acknowledges that many Laramie residents have changed their opinion about the Shepard case. But their new perspectives are presented as symptomatic of an inability to manage a sustained critique of antigay biases in their city.

For example, one character says, “In some ways it’s more acceptable to say yes we do have drug problems in a place like Laramie. It’s something you can fix. Hatreds and especially homophobic hostilities seem less controllable.” The dramatic tension that propels the show forward is the debate about whether Shepard was murdered because he was gay or because he was a victim of a drug-induced robbery. The denouement is the show’s interview with Aaron McKinney. After proclaiming that he does not like gay people, McKinney is asked if Shepard’s sexuality had something to do with why he attacked him. He responds by saying, “It’s a possibility. That night I did it, I did have hatred for homosexuals. That mighta played a small part.” While he equivocates to some degree, as opposed to what he said in the 20/20 interview, McKinney does admit that Shepard’s sexuality had a role in the brutal assault. Audiences across the country are, thus, reassured that the narrative they have been told, and that has been repeated in every production of *The Laramie Project*, is true: Matthew Shepard died because he was gay.

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440 Gregory, *Salvation at the Stake*, 16.


442 Ibid., 53.
Stephen Jimenez, one of the producers for the 20/20 story, released a book on the fifteenth anniversary of Shepard’s death entitled, *The Book of Matt: Hidden Truths About the Murder of Matthew Shepard*.\(^{443}\) In effect, the book furthers the perspective put forth in the 20/20 episode. Jimenez, who is gay, also makes several claims about Shepard that strip him of his innocent image. For example, Jimenez argues that Shepard was an active crystal methamphetamine user, that he was a well-known drug dealer, and that he and Aaron McKinney had a sexual relationship. McKinney, however, in his interviews with Jimenez, denies that he and Shepard were lovers. Jimenez nevertheless believes other Laramie residents who claim that McKinney and Shepard partied together and had sex, suggesting that McKinney is not comfortable admitting to having had sex with men. Jimenez also proffers that Shepard was high on crystal meth the night he was attacked.

To substantiate this claim, Jimenez turns to Shepard’s autopsy report. Although investigators did not find drugs in Shepard’s system, Jimenez says, “Performed five days after the attack, it [the autopsy] documents the presence of numerous substances, including phenylpropanolamine, one of the precursor ingredients in the manufacture of methamphetamine.”\(^{444}\) Jimenez does not name the “numerous substances” in the report.

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but phenylpropanolamine is a common decongestant that would show up in autopsies of people who had recently taken cold medicine. Jimenez also believes that Shepard was a drug dealer who a competitor wanted dead. Jimenez is only able to validate this claim by quoting someone who thinks, but does not know, that competing drug dealers ordered Shepard’s execution. Thus, Jimenez does not fill in the puzzle of why Henderson and McKinney violently attacked Shepard. Rather, he creates a different puzzle that focuses on drugs rather than sexuality as the primary motive for the murder.

As scholar of martyrdom, Candida Moss, makes clear, most martyr narratives are fabrications. Even martyrlogies with some historical veracity also usually contain elaborate embellishments. Because martyrs are so commonly imagined as superior to mortals, they become unrealistic representations of lived life, of humanity with all its flaws. With regard to Matthew Shepard, he was, undoubtedly, not perfect. Despite the habitual construction of him as a childlike innocent, he likely had sex and may have done drugs regularly. He was, after all, HIV positive, which he could have gotten from sex or from a drug needle. But even if he used drugs, had unprotected sex, managed a crystal methamphetamine business, or knew Aaron McKinney well, his murder does not become less gruesome. Nor does his murder need to be limited to one cause. He could have been attacked because he was a gay drug dealer usurping the territory of straight men put off by his sexuality and by him taking away their business. Or he could have threatened to

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reveal that he and McKinney had sex, provoking fear and rage in McKinney who insists that he never had sex with men. These are speculations, but they at least break out of the binary that Shepard either died because he was gay or for some other unrelated reason. As Michael Bronski argues, “If the need to define hate crimes, and to argue against homophobic violence, means we have to extract them from the complicated fabric of everyday life, then we are all in trouble.”\textsuperscript{447} In other words, if one only cares about Shepard’s death because he has been understood as a childlike innocent, then such a person probably does not care about the actual experiences of gay Americans who will always be more complicated than the myopic portrayal of Matthew Shepard as an angelic all-American kid.

A final counter-perspective that has arisen in relation to Shepard is the idea, largely professed by some LGBT Americans, that Shepard’s death improperly overshadowed the struggles of LGBT citizens who are not white gay men. As I have illustrated throughout this chapter, Shepard’s appeal is directly related to him being a young, white, Protestant man. That Shepard was immediately regarded as an innocent victim exposes a privilege granted to him for being male. Women who are assaulted after leaving a bar and getting into a truck with two unknown men are not as easily imagined as innocents; indeed, they can even be understood as responsible for having made the decision to drink alone, fraternize with strange men, and agree to go home with them. Yet, Shepard was immediately situated as an innocent figure. And, as media scholar

Jennifer Petersen, observes, “Shepard was the first victim of anti-gay violence to be so publicly mourned as a national loss.”\textsuperscript{448} But because Shepard was hardly the first gay American to be murdered, the outpouring of support for him exposed that many other LGBT deaths were less important. Within two months after Shepard’s death, people began to write to \textit{The Advocate} complaining that several gay citizens, mostly racial minorities, had also been killed in 1998, but that their names were never invoked alongside Shepard or remembered as national tragedies.\textsuperscript{449}

An LGBT death in the 1990s that did receive a fair amount of national attention was the murder of Brandon Teena in 1993.\textsuperscript{450} Teena was a white, 21-year-old transgender man living in Nebraska who passed as male and who had not disclosed that his assigned

\textsuperscript{448} Petersen, \textit{Murder, the Media, and the Politics of Public Feelings}, 27-28.

\textsuperscript{449} See, for example, Urvashi Vaid, “Post-Principle Blues,” \textit{The Advocate}, December 8, 1998, 96.

\textsuperscript{450} One additional gay death that received national attention in the 1990s was the murder of Scott Amedure who was shot in 1995 by his neighbor, Jonathan Schmitz, after the two appeared on the \textit{Jenny Jones} talk show where Amedure confessed to having a crush on Schmitz. Schmitz, however, said that he was straight and that the show’s producers convinced him to be on the show because he had a female secret admirer. Three days after the taping, Schmitz purchased a shotgun, shot Amedure twice in the chest, and then turned himself into the police. Schmitz was convicted of second-degree murder, but there was no great outpouring of support for Amedure in any way similar to what happened in the wake of Shepard’s death. Schmitz was framed as mentally unstable, making Amedure’s death an unfortunate incident with a private citizen. Shepard’s murder, however, was situated as symptomatic of American antigay hostilities. Additionally, Amedure, a 32-year-old gay man, was an adult and explicitly sexualized in that he was pursuing a straight man on national television. In that regard, Amedure fit the antigay stereotype of the hypersexual adult gay man who, given the chance, wants to convert all men to homosexuality. Amedure’s death received national attention, but not in a way that provoked national grief or that galvanized activism. For a description of the murder, see “Fatal Shooting Follows Surprise on TV Talk Show,” \textit{New York Times} (New York, NY), March 12, 1995.
birth sex was female. His secret was revealed when a local newspaper printed his legal name after he had been caught forging bad checks. Once his assigned birth sex was made public, two male acquaintances attacked and raped him. Teena reported the rape to the police, but the men were never charged with a crime. After hearing that Teena had reported them, the same men broke into the house where Teena was staying and shot him. They also murdered the two other people who were present in the house. One of the murderers reached a plea bargain and is serving a life sentence in prison. The other was sentenced to death and, as of 2014, is awaiting execution.\textsuperscript{451} Teena’s murder was the focus of the 1998 documentary \textit{The Brandon Teena Story}, and the 1999 film for which Hilary Swank won an Academy Award playing Teena, \textit{Boys Don’t Cry}. In being the focus of two films, Teena’s murder has become one of the most well-known and publicized transgender deaths in the United States, even as Teena garnered significantly less attention than Shepard.\textsuperscript{452} As opposed to white gay men, transgender Americans face significantly higher risks for physical violence, sexual assault, and murder.\textsuperscript{453} Judith

\textsuperscript{451} For more on the legal aftermath of Teena’s murder, see Parker Marie Molloy, “20 Years After Brandon Teena’s Death, Trans Rights Still Have a Long Way to Go,” \textit{The Advocate}, last modified January 2, 2014, \url{http://www.advocate.com/politics/transgender/2014/01/02/20-years-after-brandon-teenas-death-trans-rights-still-have-long-way}


\textsuperscript{453} For an overview on the statistics of violence committed against transgender people in the United States, see Rebecca L. Stotzer, “Violence Against Transgender People: A
Butler suggests that transgender bodies are particularly susceptible to violence because they occupy a space between the gender binary, and, in embodying such a space, they are commonly viewed as not fully human, as threatening to the purported natural order, and in need of eradication.454 Beginning in the late 1990s, several within the transgender community inaugurated an annual Transgender Day of Remembrance to honor those who have been murdered. Despite the greater risks faced by transgender people, Teena’s death did not produce the outpouring of sympathy or activism that occurred after Shepard’s murder. Transgender issues were not at the fore of American public life when Teena was murdered in 1993. Nor were transgender issues a primary focus of national LGBT activism.455 Moreover, Shepard’s popularity and the use of his image to evoke widespread sympathies was partially attributable to his gender-typical presentation. As LGBT activist, Cathy Renna, writes, “Unlike many victims of hate crimes, such as those involving gender bending, Matthew could not be seen as ‘other.’”456 Thus, one of the reasons why Shepard garnered vast popularity was because he was a gay American who adhered to male gender norms of dress and bodily presentation. Although Shepard has


455 Tina Fetner similarly notes that, “By the mid-1990s the lesbian and gay movement considered itself an “LGBT” movement...although lesbian and gay men’s politics remained the highest priorities for most organizations.” See Fetner, *How the Religious Right Shaped Lesbian and Gay Activism*, 89.

been continually invoked as an icon for victims of violence within LGBT communities, he hardly represents those who are the most vulnerable, such as women, people of color, and those who are transgender or genderqueer. He became the image of an LGBT American worthy of empathy, in no small part, because of his gender presentation and privilege.

Concluding Thoughts: Martyrdom as a Prescriptive Discourse

Several scholars of martyrdom have argued that martyrdom is best understood as a prescriptive discourse.\(^{457}\) From this perspective, martyrs are not created in the act of dying, but formed through later discursive mechanisms such as the writing of texts and telling of stories. Stephanie Cobb, for example, writes that martyr narratives “are both descriptive and prescriptive,”\(^{458}\) meaning that martyrologies are not only meant to recapitulate a martyr’s story, they are also intended to instruct audiences through prescriptions on how to live one’s life. In this regard, one can understand the martyrdom of Matthew Shepard as a discourse that inculcates a series of values, including who matters and why. That a white, middle-class, college-educated, Protestant, young man became such a visible icon for American gay rights reinforces the already existing social

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hierarchies in the United States and exposes the limits of who matters each time his name is invoked. Shepard’s ongoing legacy, thus, continually reinscribes who counts as an acceptable LGBT citizen.

In the “us” and “them” martyrrial divide, Shepard’s “us” cannot possibly include all of the many ways of being queer that are different from the innocent image Shepard came to represent. As J. Halberstam argues, “while the brutalization of a transgender sex worker of color raises little outcry in the city from local queer activists, the murder of a white boy in rural North America can stir up an enormous activist response.”

Here, Halberstam is making the case that as thousands gathered to mourn Shepard in New York, Los Angeles, and D.C., they concurrently ignored the violent deaths of LGBT citizens within their own cities. Shepard mattered, not those among them who were the most vulnerable. Further, scholar of religion in antiquity, David Frankfurter, argues that martyrrologies produce fantasies of a future in which the martyr would no longer be subjected to suffering or horrific death. That Shepard achieved vast posthumous appeal reveals that many Americans have been able to fantasize a future that Shepard would have occupied if he had not been murdered for being gay. Imagining a future for Shepard is not difficult for most since many white, Protestant, college-educated men stand at the apex of social opportunities in the United States. Had Shepard been black, a butch

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lesbian, or a genderqueer Native American, masses of people might not have been able to fantasize a future for him that would be free of violence.

In addition to ideas of who matters, Shepard’s martyrdom also inculcates values, especially about what forms of sexual expression are acceptable. Although Shepard has been upheld as a gay martyr, his veneration has not been about the promotion of diverse sexual freedoms. The recurrent depiction of Shepard as a desexualized youth does not liberate gay or nonnormative sex from stigma. If anything, making Shepard’s sex life invisible simply reinforces the dominant Protestant sexual ethos where sex is expected to be relegated and contained to the bedroom of married, monogamous couples. As with Harvey Milk who was posthumously stripped of his gay liberationist ideas about polyamory, those who have emblemized Shepard have not portrayed him as a gay man who seeks sex. Instead, he has been depicted as a sexually-innocent youth. Queer theorist Lee Edelman argues that structuring arguments around images of so-called innocent children, what he terms “reproductive futurism,” is not actually about protecting children, but about regulating the behaviors of adults.⁴⁶¹ In this regard, gay social acceptance is connected to making gay sex invisible. At a time when gay activism placed tremendous efforts in fighting for marriage and the associated containment of sex to the marital bed, Shepard emerged as a popular icon because of how he was stripped of associations with overt gay sexual expressions. In the martyrrial dividing line, Shepard stands opposite, as the archives make clear, from those who cruise for sex in the public sphere. As the nonthreatening adolescent, he also stands opposite BDSM lesbian couples, leather

daddies, aggressive bears, and group sex swingers. Such sexual expressions remain stigmatized. Although Shepard became a prominent national gay figure, his martyrdom did not open up space for flourishing sexual possibilities. If anything, the discourses surrounding his martyrdom reinscribes the already existing sexual hierarchy where the only acceptable forms of gay and lesbian sex are those safely contained to monogamous matrimony.

As briefly discussed in chapter one, a recurring idea that Foucault illustrated is that dominance is maintained not simply through official state mechanisms, but also through discourses that give particular values, ideas, and ways of inhabiting the world an appearance of being natural and universal. Dominance can, thus, be maintained through discourses. As I have illustrated throughout this chapter, Protestant Christian dominance has been reinforced in the United States through the discourses surrounding Matthew Shepard. Writers and activists outside of religious institutions have habitually used Christian concepts as a tool for promoting Shepard’s influence and for framing arguments for gay equality. One could counter my argument by contending that the recurrent use of Christian ideas to structure Shepard’s story actually queers Christianity, thereby subverting its power. As one example of this line of thinking, a writer for the Village Voice declares that, “Making a connection between Jesus’ torment and Matthew’s turns the theological justification for homophobia on its head.”462 While structuring narratives of Shepard with Christian tropes may undo some assumptions about the place of gays within Christianity, using Christian ideas to argue for gay acceptance simply reinforces

Christianity’s dominance. Shepard, a mainline practicing Protestant, became a figure gay writers and activists could use to present gays as good people driven by Christian teachings. Where many in the religious right had argued for decades that gays were godless adults who rejected Christ’s love, Shepard represented a gay American who loved, and who was loved by, Christ. Not only does this suggest that Shepard’s death would have been less valuable if he had not been a Protestant, it also exposes how secular gay activists contributed to Protestant Christian dominance through discourses that reproduce Christian ideas as American values and as necessary for entrée into full American citizenship.
CHAPTER 5

THE SACRIFICIAL SUICIDE: TYLER CLEMENTI

Unlike Harvey Milk and Matthew Shepard, Tyler Clementi was not murdered; he took his own life. His suicide in 2010 occurred at a time when things were supposedly going well for gay Americans, or, at least, for white, middle-class, gay, Christian men. Clementi killed himself a few weeks into his freshman year of college by jumping off the George Washington Bridge after his roommate tweeted that he had secretly seen Clementi kiss another man in their dorm room. His suicide garnered national attention and widespread sympathy. The editors of Out magazine, the gay publication that by 2010 had the largest national circulation, wrote that Clementi “became an overnight symbol of the fight against cyber-bullying and homophobia.” While Clementi had not been murdered, he was commonly understood as having been pushed to suicide by antigay harassment. News articles subsequently made gay teen suicide a national topic, and Clementi became the face of gay youth driven to death by the antigay actions of their peers. The substantial attention given to Clementi’s suicide led to, for instance, Philadelphia’s gay and lesbian newspaper, the Philadelphia Gay News, naming Clementi the “2010 Person of the Year.” Clementi had not been a gay activist, but the


publication insisted that his suicide achieved more for gay Americans than the work of any living person that year. The explosion of media coverage about Clementi did not quickly vanquish. A play and a national choral production about Clementi premiered in subsequent years, and the Tyler Clementi Higher Education Anti-Harassment Act has been introduced into Congress twice.\footnote{465} Clementi’s name also continues to be invoked in news articles and by gay advocates. For instance, three years after Clementi died, \textit{Gay City News}, New York City’s last remaining gay and lesbian newspaper, published an article imploring the Roman Catholic Church to include Clementi, a Protestant evangelical, among the Church’s list of official martyrs. The article’s writer insisted that Clementi “was more than a suicide. He was a martyr, martyred for being gay, martyred by homophobia.”\footnote{466} That Clementi was understood as “martyred” reveals that he was not regarded as responsible for his own death. Consequently, Tyler Clementi has become the most well-known gay teen suicide in United States history.

In this chapter I will present a comparative analysis of the discourses surrounding Tyler Clementi’s suicide to those of Matthew Shepard’s murder. I am comparing

\footnote{465} The play \textit{Teddy Ferrara}, which is a fictive show inspired by Clementi’s death, premiered in Chicago in February 2013 and was reviewed not only in Chicago papers but also in the \textit{New York Times}. See, Charles Isherwood, “Staging Stories That are Torn from the News,” \textit{New York Times} (New York, NY), Feb. 20, 2013. See also, Christopher Shinn, \textit{Teddy Ferrara} (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2013). The musical production \textit{Tyler’s Suite} is about Clementi’s life and was commissioned by six Gay Men’s Choruses throughout the country. See, Matthew Bajko, “Chorus Show Celebrates Tyler Clementi’s Life,” \textit{Bay Area Reporter} (San Francisco, CA), March 20, 2014. The Tyler Clementi Higher Education Anti-Harassment Act was first introduced into Congress in 2010 by Senator Frank Lautenberg. It was again introduced in 2014 by Senators Patty Murray and Tammy Baldwin.

Clementi to Shepard in order to explore what changed and what remained the same in the twelve years between their deaths, and to examine how Clementi’s death was used to promote twenty-first century acceptance of gay Americans. While I will occasionally highlight similarities to Harvey Milk, Shepard and Clementi offer greater intersectional points for analysis because of how both immediately elicited widespread national attention. I will begin by providing a brief biographical sketch of Clementi, the context of his suicide, and the ensuing criminal trial of his roommate, Dharun Ravi. After presenting background on Clementi, I will examine why Clementi, like Shepard, was a gay death that instantly mattered to the nation. My intervention here is not to understand why Clementi committed suicide, but to analyze the messages produced by those who have upheld him as emblematic of American gay youth. Like Shepard, Clementi was commonly used to mark a discursive dividing line of us/them and good/evil Americans. I will, therefore, investigate how those divisions were established and analyze how they functioned. Martyrs are also commonly meant to inspire conversion. I will, therefore, examine how Clementi was used to convert religious attitudes about homosexuality, especially those of evangelical Christians. Invocations of martyrdom additionally tend to conclude with redemptive responses, with efforts to invert death from defeat into victory. Consequently, I will analyze the strategic efforts to redeem Clementi’s suicide and explore why such attempts have been so prevalent in secular gay advocacy.

As this chapter will illustrate, the outpouring of activism related to Tyler Clementi’s death reveals that Clementi’s suicide, not his sexuality, was generally understood as an aberration in twenty-first century America. In ways even greater than at the time of Shepard’s death in 1998, by 2010, white, middle-class, Christian gays and
lesbians were more regularly regarded as included within the American national body. Sexual “orientation” was increasingly understood by straight and gay Americans as something fixed at birth. Media depictions of gays as similar to straights proliferated in the years after Shepard’s murder as the country increasingly embraced a “born gay” attitude toward homosexuality. And yet, the national attention on Clementi’s suicide also exposed how little had changed in terms of who matters most within gay advocacy and American mainstream media since 1998. Once again, the white, middle-class, Protestant, college student became the public emblem of the universal traumas purportedly faced by all gays. By 2010, and especially through Clementi’s suicide, “gay youth” became a national focus, and Clementi became the emblem of American gay adolescents who were accordingly understood as vulnerable victims. His suicide, in turn, reignited national conversations about bullying. But the focus on bullies in the discourses surrounding Clementi reduced discussions of American sexual hierarchies to simple notions of innocent victims and evil villains, a common feature of martyrlogies, and did little to undo societal disciplinary regimes of sexuality and gender. Instead, gay advocates reframed Clementi’s death according to a Christian redemptive strategy that inverted his suicide from despair into hope, from a despondent death of an individual into the potential for a transformed society because he died. The discourses surrounding Clementi reflect several ways that Christian theological ideas function as basic American cultural assumptions in the twenty-first century. Through an array of writings and campaigns in relation to Clementi, such as the It Gets Better project, twenty-first century gay advocates offered redemption from gay suffering through prescriptions to comport to liberal Protestant norms in order to be accepted as American citizens.
Tyler Clementi Background

Tyler Clementi was born on December 19, 1991 to a middle-class family in the affluent town of Ridgewood, New Jersey. He was shy throughout childhood, but was an accomplished and talented violinist. Clementi was active in his family’s nondenominational evangelical church prior to starting college. He regularly played violin at Sunday services and participated in the church youth group. Clementi was one of three boys, and in the summer before he left for college his older brother, James, privately came out to Tyler who, in turn, told his brother that was also gay. Clementi came out to his parents a few days before he moved to Rutgers University in the fall of 2010. After coming out to his parents, Clementi texted a friend, writing, “It’s a good thing dad is ok w/it or I would be in serious trouble / mom has basically completely rejected me.”

Clementi and his freshman roommate, Dharun Ravi, did not know each other prior to living together in university housing. After a few weeks into the semester, Clementi asked Ravi if he could have the room to himself for a couple of hours. He did not tell Ravi why he wanted privacy, but Clementi had met a man on the internet who he wanted to invite to their room. Ravi had assumed that Clementi was gay before living with him. In the weeks before their freshman year, Ravi had searched the internet for Clementi’s e-mail alias and found that the same alias had been used to post comments on a website for gay men. After agreeing to give Clementi the room for a window of time,

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Ravi configured his computer’s webcam so he could spy on Clementi. He set his computer to accept incoming chat requests, which then triggered his webcam to activate and broadcast whatever was happening in the room. To prevent Clementi from noticing anything irregular, Ravi set his computer screen to black so that it would not appear in use when the webcam activated. Ravi then communicated his plan to Molly Wei, a friend from high school who lived on the same residence hall floor.

On September 19, 2010, Clementi’s visitor arrived to his dorm room as planned. Ravi went into Wei’s room where the two initiated a chat message with Ravi’s computer. The webcam turned on and Ravi and Wei were able to see two men kissing before they disconnected the chat. Ravi then tweeted, “Roommate asked for the room till midnight. I went to molly’s room and turned on my webcam. I saw him making out with a dude. Yay.” Ravi ran an errand soon after he posted that message on Twitter. While Ravi was away, four female students entered Wei’s room. Wei told them what she had witnessed and the women decided to activate the webcam. When the camera went live the women were able to see Clementi and could tell that neither he nor the other man was wearing a shirt before they quickly deactivated the chat. Hours later Clementi sent an Instant Message to a friend saying that he had noticed the green light activate on Ravi’s webcam when he had been in bed with his visitor. He got out of bed to inspect it, but the webcam deactivated by the time he reached the computer.

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Clementi read Ravi’s Twitter message about seeing him “making out with a dude” after his visitor left their room. He stayed up most of the night posting to internet message boards and chat rooms asking for advice about how to handle the situation. He also submitted an online request to change rooms through the Rutgers housing system in the early hours of the morning on September 20, saying that he wanted a room change because his “roommate used a webcam to spy on me.” But the next day, September 21, Clementi texted Ravi to ask for privacy in their room again that night, which Ravi said was fine. Clementi had invited the same visitor to return. That evening Ravi tweeted, “Anyone with iChat, I dare you to video chat me between the hours of 9:30 and 12. Yes, it’s happening again.” Clementi read the tweet before his guest arrived. He spoke with his resident adviser who instructed him to document everything in an e-mail. Clementi returned to his room, unplugged Ravi’s computer, and turned off Ravi’s power strip. He texted a friend about the situation and explained that he disconnected the power strip because he was afraid Ravi “might have hidden another webcam.” Clementi’s visitor arrived as scheduled and, after he left, Clementi e-mailed his resident adviser with a formal complaint that included quotations from Ravi’s Twitter messages.

The next day, September 22, 2010, Clementi received an e-mail from the Rutgers residence life department asking him to call. But Clementi spent three hours that

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afternoon in rehearsal with the university symphony. During that time, Clementi’s resident adviser confronted Ravi with allegations made by Clementi. Just after 5:00pm Clementi returned to his residence hall room. Ravi was also in the room, but it is unknown if they spoke. In a case laden with transcribed text from Instant Message chats, e-mails, cell phone texts, and social media posts, verbal dialogue between the two roommates remains undocumented and without witnesses. Around 6:30pm Clementi took a university shuttle to catch a train bound for Manhattan. From there he took the subway uptown and then walked toward the George Washington Bridge. At 8:42pm he posted a status update on Facebook saying, “Jumping off the gw bridge sorry.” He left his wallet and phone on the bridge and jumped to his death sometime before 9:00pm.

Clementi’s body was found seven days later, and Ravi and Wei were arrested and charged with invasion of privacy. They were not, however, charged with causing Clementi’s death. The two withdrew from Rutgers, and Wei reached a plea bargain to testify against Ravi, attend counselling, and serve three hundred hours of community service. The New Jersey prosecutors decided to try Ravi’s case as a hate crime. If convicted, Ravi faced up to ten years in prison and deportation to India where he was a citizen. The prosecutors extended two plea offers to Ravi, but he declined both. The trial took place in March 2012 and Ravi was found guilty of fifteen charges, including invasion of privacy, evidence tampering, and bias intimidation, which constituted a hate crime. In May 2012 the judge sentenced Ravi to thirty days in jail. He was released after twenty.

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From Matthew Shepard to Tyler Clementi

As with Matthew Shepard’s murder twelve years earlier, Tyler Clementi’s suicide is a unique moment in United States history when the death of a gay American evoked immediate and widespread outbursts of anger, sympathy, and activism. Soon after Clementi’s body was found two writers for the Huffington Post observed that, “The outpouring of emotion over Clementi’s death recalls the reaction to the killing of Shepard.”

Clementi and Shepard shared several similarities. Like Shepard, Clementi was white, male, middle-class, in college, Protestant, involved in a church community, and young. In this regard, the outpouring of sympathy for Clementi revealed how little had changed since Shepard’s death in terms of who matters within American gay advocacy and mainstream media. After Shepard’s murder, countless queers who had been brutally murdered or who had committed suicide went nameless and faceless to the American public. Massive national attention was once again given to someone who, in many ways, already stood at the top of the American social hierarchy. Even as portrayals of gays and lesbians in American popular culture proliferated in the years between Shepard and Clementi’s deaths, those representations primarily depicted white, middle-class, affable gays.

Clementi’s image as a preppy, white, friendly, young man fit well within such depictions that millions of straight Americans had embraced as ideal gay

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citizens. In turn, as with Shepard, the white, male, Protestant, college student became the emblem of the purportedly universal trials that gay youth endure, regardless of differences in race, gender, class, or religion.

Even though Clementi was a legal adult, his constructed image, as with Shepard, was that of an adolescent. Like Shepard, Clementi was small, standing at five feet, six inches. He was also fair-skinned, freckled, and wore glasses. Reporters emphasized that he was shy, in the first weeks of his freshman year, and a violin prodigy, none of which gave the appearance of a sexually aggressive adult. The press consistently ran pictures of him wearing shirts with a collar or in suits playing the violin. His image, therefore, fit within cultural assumptions of respectable, nonthreatening, white, young men. In this regard, Clementi, like Shepard, was not understood as having stepped outside the boundaries of acceptable and normative male gender presentations.

The focus on Clementi and Shepard within mainstream media and gay advocacy, rather than on queers of color and gender nonconformists, illustrates an argument made by Jewish studies scholar, Jonathan Boyarin, that empathy is primarily “an ethic of the obliteration of Otherness.” Following this logic, Clementi was successful in garnering

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475 Legal scholar Nan Hunter similarly observes that the US Supreme Court’s decisions in favor of gay Americans have likely been informed by popular culture representations of gays and lesbians, writing, “Multiple commentators have explained the Court’s equality rhetoric...by noting how culturally normal it has become to see endearing and straight-friendly depictions of (mostly) gay men and (some) lesbians in mass media.” See Nan D. Hunter, “Lawrence v. Texas as Law and Culture,” in Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture, ed. Lisa Duggan and Nan D. Hunter (New York: Routledge, 2006), 206.

widespread appeal because his constructed image fit well within ideas of normative, young, mainstream, American citizens. As with Shepard, (white) parents could imagine that Clementi might have been their son. He did not gender bend, he was Christian, white, and middle-class. His “Otherness” from the dominant class was reduced to his sexuality. And by 2010, as historian John D’Emilio highlights, Americans had increasingly embraced the idea of fixed sexual orientations.\textsuperscript{477} D’Emilio observes that earlier feminist, gay liberationist, and radical queer arguments about sexuality as social constructs failed to evoke support for gay and lesbian causes. Such notions of sexuality as a preference faded and were largely replaced by the idea that people were born with particular sexual orientations. D’Emilio writes, “Many of our allies, or would-be allies, love this idea [of “born gay”]. The people we are trying to convince to support our quest for justice and respect can take the argument from nature and run with it.”\textsuperscript{478} Although the theory of “sexual orientation” pre-dates the twenty-first century, by Clementi’s death in 2010 many Americans responded well to the idea of fixed sexual orientations and, theoretically, believed that people should not be harassed because of how they were born.\textsuperscript{479} “Born gay” rhetoric, in turn, functioned as a secularized version of “God made me this way,” offering an argument against those who wanted to claim that gays chose sinful lives. For Americans moved by “born gay” argumentation, whether because of God


\textsuperscript{478} Ibid., 159.

\textsuperscript{479} For a lengthy discussion of the limits of “born this way” rhetoric in relation to sexuality and how it facilitates tolerance, not equality, see Jakobsen and Pellegrini, \textit{Love the Sin}, 75-101.
or nature, Clementi was understood as having been tortured for something he could not control, which rendered him as an innocent victim.

Common to both Shepard and Clementi’s narratives was that both were introduced to the American public as innocent young fatalities who died at the hands of antigay bigots. While Shepard was beaten to death, Clementi was presented as having been pushed to suicide by antigay harassment. In Clementi’s case, he was depicted as a shy and private teenager who killed himself because his sex life had been broadcast without his consent. For example, the New York Times titled its first article on Clementi, “Private Moment Made Public, Then a Fatal Jump.”480 Similarly, The Advocate’s first story on Clementi was headlined, “Sex Prank Drives Teen to Suicide.”481 The Chronicle of Higher Education: “A Secret Moment Shown to the World, a Lonely Leap From a Bridge.”482 And the New Jersey Star-Ledger: “Rutgers Freshman is Presumed Dead in Suicide After Roommate Broadcast Gay Sexual Encounter Online.”483 The idea that Clementi committed suicide because his sex life had been made public was connected to Ravi’s Twitter messages. In Ravi’s second tweet he invited his Twitter followers to watch his roommate in a sexual encounter, which gave police and the press the impression that


483 See Kelly Heyboer, “Rutgers Freshman is Presumed Dead in Suicide After Roommate Broadcast Gay Sexual Encounter Online,” The Star-Ledger (Newark, NJ), Sept. 29, 2010.
he had broadcast Clementi in a sex act with another man. The writer for the first *New York Times*’ story declared, “[T]he Rutgers University student [Ravi] who sent the message used a camera in his dormitory to stream the roommate’s intimate encounter live on the Internet.”484 The idea that Ravi publicly broadcast Clementi in a sex act became the dominant narrative that framed Clementi’s suicide. Ravi and Wei were also believed to have recorded Clementi and thought to have uploaded the recording to the internet. Writing for *The Nation*, openly-gay executive editor, Richard Kim, wrote that, “two students posted a video of him [Clementi] having sex with another man online.”485 Similarly, in a statement that was quoted in several news articles, Ellen DeGeneres announced on her talk show, while holding back tears, that Clementi “was outed as being gay on the Internet and he killed himself.”486 The public’s perception of what happened was, thus, that Ravi and Wei secretly recorded a closeted Clementi having sex with a man, that they broadcast the recording online for the world to see, and that Clementi killed himself because he had been publicly outed.

An important distinction from the time of Shepard’s death in 1998 is that Clementi’s story spoke to unique twenty-first century cultural anxieties about social media and fears that private material on the internet could easily become public. By


Clementi’s death in 2010 Americans of all ages, but especially adolescents and young adults, were actively engaged in sharing aspects of their private lives on the internet. As one writer for the Christian Science Monitor explains, “The story of Tyler Clementi is bringing to light the darker side of the pervasiveness of social media in young people’s lives. It’s prompting renewed calls for…stronger consequences for harmful uses of media technology.”

In the years between Shepard and Clementi’s deaths, internet use exploded and provided a way for people to connect virtually and share aspects of their lives, real and fabricated, with people they had never met. Hugely popular social media sites like Facebook and Twitter allowed people to construct and project images of themselves, and to observe the lives of countless others. Although an active user of social media himself, even seeking sexual partners through an internet site, the press depicted Clementi as keeping his sexual side private. In being understood as a closeted gay teenager, Clementi was perceived as deeply shamed by the public knowledge that he had a sexual encounter with a man. To underscore this point, a spokesperson for PFLAG—Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays—proclaimed that, “To this poor kid [Clementi], it’s better to be dead than to have people know he’s gay.”

Ironically, then, even as Clementi was presented as having killed himself because his sex life was made public, he was used as a national symbol for the traumas faced by gay teenagers. His sex


life became far greater public knowledge in death than it had in life even though pro-gay advocates, such as the spokesperson for PFLAG, insisted that he committed suicide because he did not want people to know about his private sexual practices.

Connected to how Clementi’s narrative was immediately framed, another important difference between Shepard and Clementi was that Shepard was mostly desexualized. For Clementi, though, sex was an inextricable part of his story. In the twelve years between Shepard and Clementi’s deaths, depictions of gays as sexually similar to straights entered the public sphere in several ways. For one, gay advocates made same-sex marriage the unwavering political priority of the twenty-first century. Advocates for same-sex marriage repeatedly emphasized that gays were like straights who wanted to date and eventually confine sex to matrimonial coupling. Clementi was, therefore, not seen as violating a life script that increasingly incorporated gay Americans. Additionally, during the intervening years between Shepard and Clementi, television and film depictions of gays multiplied, often presenting gays as driven by romantic plots virtually identical to the storylines of straights. The idea that a young gay man could

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489 In July 2000 Vermont became the first state to grant legal recognition to same-sex couples by administering “civil unions.” In July 2003 a cover story for *Newsweek* was entitled, “The War Over Gay Marriage,” which underscored the pervasiveness and intensity with which the issue was debated. On May 17, 2004, for the first time in US history, same-sex couples were able to obtain state-recognized marriage in Massachusetts. Gay marriage became an especially significant national focus in 2008 when same-sex marriage was put to a popular vote through a ballot referendum in California. Gay advocacy groups engaged in a national fundraising effort, raised 44 million dollars, and produced a massive publicity campaign about same-sex marriage. Opponents of same-sex marriage raised an equally-substantial 39 million dollars from national fundraising efforts. The ballot measure passed and same-sex marriages ceased to take place in California for the next five years until the US Supreme Court decision in *Hollingsworth v. Perry* made them possible.
engage in sex with another man was an increasingly accepted idea by 2010. But even though sex was part of Clementi’s story, as with Shepard, Clementi was constructed as meek and not sexually imposing or aggressive. His martyrial innocence was, in many ways, configured in his not knowing that an intimate moment in his dorm room was exposed to public spectacle. The dorm room itself occupies a sexualized space in the American imaginary, a place where one negotiates privacy with a roommate. Importantly, Ravi did not tweet that Clementi was spending time in a bathhouse, gay sex club, or cruising area. Such public displays of gay sex could still be regarded as taboo and, in some situations, illegal, and therefore, not engender the widespread sympathy that occurred for Clementi. Had Clementi told Ravi that he was going to meet a man in a bathhouse or in the Central Park Rambles, a historically popular gay cruising area, the public reaction to Clementi’s “outing” and suicide might have been dramatically different. But in the post-Lawrence v. Texas United States, Clementi had not violated any laws by engaging in consensual sex in his home. Ravi even admitted in his first Twitter message that Clementi had asked for privacy. Clementi, therefore, was understood as having followed the expected social rules of containing sex to the private sphere and of seeking permission from his dorm roommate who, nevertheless, publically mocked him because his sexual encounter included another man.

490 In 2003 the United States Supreme Court reversed its 1986 Bowers v. Hardwick decision discussed in chapter three, ruling in Lawrence v. Texas that sodomy laws were unconstitutional and that same-sex couples could not be criminalized for consensual sex within their private homes. The Court’s ruling in Lawrence extended beyond Texas and rendered all state sodomy laws unconstitutional. Gay sex in the public sphere, like bathhouses, could still be criminalized, but consensual sex between people of the same gender in private homes was legally permitted.
The Martyr as Representative of Many

Scholar of early Christianity, Candida Moss, argues that martyr stories proliferated in the early Church because martyrs were meant to represent the universal unjust persecution of Christians; in a similar way, Clementi’s image was used to symbolize the purported universal vulnerabilities of gay youth in the United States. National press articles had started to circulate at the time of Clementi’s death about teenagers who had recently committed suicide after enduring bullying for being gay or for being perceived to be gay. For example, the week after Clementi’s suicide a *Christian Science Monitor* article reported that, “Five teenagers in the United States have taken their lives in recent weeks – all reportedly because they were openly or thought to be gay.”\(^{491}\) That same day, the *New York Times* published an article entitled, “Suicides Put Light on Pressures of Gay Teenagers.”\(^{492}\) *The Advocate* similarly situated Clementi’s death within “the recent epidemic of bullying and gay teen suicide.”\(^{493}\) Suddenly, Clementi’s death was not just about an isolated situation; his death was emblematic of a much larger national issue: the “epidemic” of gay youth suicides and the ubiquity of deadly bullying. The director of University of Pennsylvania’s LGBT Center told the *Philadelphia Gay News* that, “it’s ‘irrefutable’ that Clementi’s suicide garnered the


greatest amount of media attention for LGBT youth suicide than ever before.”494 People magazine put Clementi on their cover underneath the words, “Teen Suicide Tragedies: Deadly Bullying.”495 At the same time, vigils for Clementi sprang up across the country on university campuses and in city parks where thousands mourned the eighteen-year-old who had been unknown to the world in life. The vigil for Clementi in New York City, for example, included the state’s governor and multiple celebrities.496 Almost instantly, Tyler Clementi became the twenty-first century symbol of bullied gay youth.

Bullying was a national topic prior to Clementi’s suicide. The subject had become a particular focus six months after Matthew Shepard’s murder when a mass school shooting took place at Columbine High School in the predominately white suburban town of Littleton, Colorado. The teen murderers were understood, in part, as having been routinely bullied, mocked, and humiliated in the years leading up to their killing spree. Forty Two states had passed laws against bullying by 2010, most of which were enacted in the years after the Columbine shooting. Just a few weeks prior to Clementi’s suicide, the Secretary of Education hosted a national Bullying Prevention Summit in Washington D.C. where he announced that, “even in this economic climate [of a recession], President Obama had asked for a 12% increase in funding for antibullying programs.”497 Within


495 See People, October 6, 2010.

496 For description of the Manhattan vigil for Clementi featuring such celebrities as Cheyenne Jackson and Kyra Sedwick, see Julie Bocer, “Clementi Vigils Held in N.J., N.Y.,” The Advocate, October 4, 2010.

this context, Clementi became the face of the calamitous consequences of teenage bullying.\textsuperscript{498} As a writer for the \textit{Philadelphia Gay News} insisted about Clementi at the end of 2010, “This was the year that everyone – regardless of sexual orientation – heard about LGBT teen suicide and antigay bullying.”\textsuperscript{499} A writer for the \textit{New York Times} similarly said that, “Coming on the eve of Bullying Prevention Month in October and National Coming Out Day on Monday [also in October], the suicide [of Clementi] immediately touched a nerve. It has generated a nationwide conversation about the vulnerability of gay teenagers.”\textsuperscript{500} The American educational calendar, thus, already addressed bullying and coming out of the closet, and in 2010, through the proximate “martyrdom” of Clementi, antigay bullying, gay teen suicide, and “the vulnerability of gay teenagers” became national topics.

At the time of Clementi’s suicide, gay advocacy groups were especially focused on working with President Obama’s administration to repeal the military’s “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy and on lobbying for same-sex marriage legislation.\textsuperscript{501} Accordingly, the

\textsuperscript{498} As I discussed in relation to Matthew Shepard, one historic function of martyrs is to put a face to a doctrine, ideology, or issue. For a discussion of this role of martyrs, see Brad Gregory, \textit{Salvation at the Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 114 especially.


\textsuperscript{501} Gay activist organizations had hoped that President Obama’s election in 2008 would pave the way for gays to serve openly in the military after the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy had been implemented in 1993 under President Clinton. But by Clementi’s death in September 2010 “don’t ask, don’t tell” was still operative. The policy was repealed a
purported “recent epidemic” of gay youth suicides became a national conversation when gay activist organizations were visibly invested in achieving full citizenship rights through military service and marriage. As Jodi Eichler-Levine argues, “Popular notions of children as idealized innocents move us toward the horrific loss of children as the apogee of proof of a community’s Americanness.”

Through Clementi the image of gay Americans was not simply isolated to those demanding marriage or a place in the military, but also of youth, of society’s most vulnerable, of the country’s future. If, as Candida Moss argues, martyr narratives function as strategic efforts to improve a group’s image through rhetoric of victimization of the innocent, the increased emphasis on gay teen suicide victims can be seen as an attempt to focus attention on how antigay polices created dangerous consequences for vulnerable gay youth.

Gay rights, following this strategy, were not simply about adults, but about saving teenagers’ lives. Child protection, as feminist scholar Gayle Rubin has illustrated, successfully “anchored many conservative agendas” for decades and contributed to the increased influence of the religious right throughout the United States. The national notoriety of Clementi, year later, but only for gays, lesbians, and bisexuals. Transgender Americans remained forbidden from serving in the United States armed forces.

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505 See, for instance, Rubin, *Deviations*, 141 and 218 especially.
someone meant to stand in for the “epidemic” of gay teen suicides, allowed gay advocates, historically demeaned as predators, to present themselves as invested in protecting America’s most vulnerable youth.

One of the most visible responses to Clementi’s suicide that allowed gay adults to present themselves as helping gay youth was the It Gets Better project. The day before Clementi jumped off the George Washington Bridge, gay writer, Dan Savage, and his husband, Terry Miller, posted a video to YouTube to inaugurate the It Gets Better project, an online campaign for adults to tell gay adolescents that life will improve after the torment of their teenage years. Savage encouraged others to submit videos, and three months later he told Out magazine that Clementi’s suicide was like “steroids injected into it [the It Gets Better project].”

By the week after Clementi’s death, more than 1,000 people had uploaded videos to YouTube with the same message for gay teenagers: “it gets better.” Within two months 10,000 people had created videos, viewed collectively 35 million times, proclaiming their own it-gets-better experience. The response to It Gets Better reveals how Clementi’s suicide was understood as an aberration. Where even fifteen years earlier young gay men were routinely associated with death because of AIDS, by 2010 that connection was no longer taken as a given. Moreover, AIDS suicides were common knowledge in the late 1980s and early 1990s, though such knowledge

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hardly evoked a public outcry in ways similar to the knowledge of Clementi’s suicide in 2010.\textsuperscript{508} As queer theorist Jasbir Puar relates, “Part of the outrage generated by these [teen suicide] deaths is based precisely in a belief that things are indeed supposed to be better, especially for a particular class of white gay men.”\textsuperscript{509} By 2010 white gays like Clementi were commonly thought to be on the precipice of full liberal inclusion in the United States, and Clementi’s suicide was used to expose the precariousness of that assumption by addressing the professed vulnerability of gay youth.

The thousands of It Gets Better videos largely employ the same themes from the first video created by Savage and Miller. The foundational video opens with Savage explaining that life in his Catholic high school was “bad,” that he grew up in a “very Catholic family,” and that he was routinely picked on because he was “obviously gay.”\textsuperscript{510} In this way, and fitting with the Protestant secularization narrative, Catholicism is the bad religious dark past that must be discarded in order to move into life as a gay man.\textsuperscript{511} Sitting next to him, his husband, Terry Miller, similarly recounts being bullied, after


\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{510} For all quotes from the inaugural It Gets Better video, see Dan Savage and Terry Miller, “It Gets Better: Dan and Terry,” \textit{ItGetsBetter.org}, last accessed September 4, 2014, \url{http://www.itgetsbetter.org/video/entry/1238/}.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{511} For a description of how this fits with the Protestant secularization narrative, see Tracy Fessenden, \textit{Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006). See also Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, eds. \textit{Secularism} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).}
which he abruptly declares, “Things got better the day I left high school.” Savage then assert’s the campaign’s central promise, saying, “However bad it is now, it gets better.” He also directly, and personally, admonishes gay youth by saying, “You have to tough this period out.” For the remainder of the eight-minute video, Savage and Miller explain how things got better for them. They describe moving away from their families’ communities to new cities, meeting each other, falling in love, finding successful careers, getting married, and raising an adopted child. Near the video’s conclusion Miller instructs gay youth to, “just stick it out.” The inaugural video ends with the line, “We have really great lives together, and you can have a great life too.”

In the It Gets Better script, and in the rhetoric connecting Clementi to the “recent epidemic” of gay teen suicides, gay youth are understood a priori as victims. They are bullied, they “must tough this period out,” and they must learn to “just stick it out” until the pain of being gay goes away. To be a gay youth in the It Gets Better narrative, and in the discourses surrounding Tyler Clementi generally, is to be in a perilous situation surrounded by thoughts of suicide. In this way, the categories of “gay teenagers,” “gay youth,” and “gay adolescents” all act as synonyms meant to signify vulnerability and risk. The It Gets Better project, however, is not the first pro-gay endeavor to make a claim about gay adolescent vulnerability or to base its efforts in gay acceptance through appeals for suffering gay youth. As Mark Jordan recounts, “The homophiles’ own plight [of the 1950s and 1960s] was frequently represented in terms of the suffering of adolescence. The troubled adolescent forced to suicide or to delinquency remained a potent emblem
for what was wrong.”\textsuperscript{512} When homophile groups petitioned for the removal of homosexuality from the DSM, for example, they grounded their argument in how gay adolescents were negatively affected by the construction of homosexuality as a mental disorder. Likewise, Matthew Shepard’s image as childlike and as vulnerable adolescent was habitually used in the late 1990s by gay activists to substantiate the need for hate crimes legislation. It Gets Better is, thus, a twenty-first century instantiation of framing gay acceptance through rhetoric of gay adolescent vulnerability.

Understanding gay youth as troubled and at risk, however, should not be taken as a basic axiom despite the idea’s ubiquity within the discourses surrounding Clementi. For one, Savage writes in the \textit{It Gets Better} book, an edited compilation of more than one hundred video testimonials, that “LGBT teenagers are four to seven times likelier to attempt suicide,”\textsuperscript{513} but he does not provide a citation for that claim. Sociologist Tom Waidzunas has written on the history of gay teen suicide statistics, how the statistics originated as a guess made by a social worker “based on the best available research” in the 1980s, and how they have circulated for decades without significant peer-reviewed substantiation.\textsuperscript{514} Even if Savage’s statistic is valid, and it could be, telling teenagers to


“tough this period out” represents only one response to gay teen suicide. Instead of promising that “it gets better,” the tens of thousands of contributors to the project could have, for example, asked queer teenagers how to make the country queerer. Rather than instruct them to sit through this period of presumed harassment and fear, the videos could have been a movement to make the country more capacious for varieties of gender and sexual expressions, to esteem, for instance, the butch girl and feminine boy as cultural ideals and to model adulthood after them. Instead of limiting the understanding of gay adolescents to a category of voiceless vulnerability, gay youth could have been invited to imagine a far more radical world than the one occupied by gay adults who prescribe their own particular experiences as a universal path to a better life. In making Clementi the representative of American gay youth, a limited response that “it gets better” was offered as a universal faith-based promise to all queers by people who largely look like adult versions of Clementi.515

The Martyr as a Marker of Good and Evil

An important explanation for why Clementi became the primary emblem of tormented gay youth was because the narrative surrounding his death was initially constructed, as is the case with martyrologies generally, with a clear division of good and evil, with an innocent victim and villainous monsters. Even as news reports shed light on

515 For a lengthier discussion of the dearth of contributors to It Gets Better from people who were not raised in Christian communities during the campaign’s first two years, as well as an analysis of how It Gets Better reinstates middle-class, white, privilege that focuses on neoliberalism as the path to a better life, see Brett Krutzsch, “It Gets Better as a Teleological Prophecy: A Universal Promise of Progress through Assimilation,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 47, no. 6 (2014): 1245-1255.
other gay teen suicides within the same month, Clementi became the name most commonly associated with gay teen suicide because his case was the only one in which the “bullies” had been arrested and their identities made public. Dharun Ravi and Molly Wei were presumed guilty of antigay harassment long before formal legal proceedings took place. As made clear by the title of a Christian Science Monitor article, “Tyler Clementi Suicide: Reaction is Swift and Widespread,” the American public quickly judged Ravi and Wei’s actions as disturbingly contemptible. In making Clementi the image of suffering gay youth, Ravi and Wei came to symbolize his opposite: harmful, homophobic, bullies. Gay advocates promulgated the idea that Clementi was driven to suicide because of his bullies’ antigay actions. The chairman of Garden State Equality, a New Jersey gay rights group, was quoted in the New York Times saying, “It is crystal clear that the motive [of Ravi and Wei] was to intimidate and harass that young man based on his sexual orientation.” Similarly, the head of Campus Pride, a gay advocacy group that works with colleges and universities, told The Advocate that, “Ravi and Wei acted maliciously to secretly tape Tyler Clementi, even posting comments to encourage others to ‘video chat’ and watch. This is an egregious act of invasion of privacy. Both students should be expelled. Period.” Other gay advocates insisted that Ravi and Wei


deserved far greater punishment than expulsion. After all, Clementi was not just traumatized; he was dead. For those like the executive director of Equality Forum, a national gay activist organization, Ravi and Wei were guilty of “manslaughter.” He said, “Clearly, what they did was premeditated…This was not a visceral response. This was something that was well thought out, executed and then put on the worldwide Internet.”519 Even the New Jersey governor, Chris Christie, someone who had not been supportive of pro-gay initiatives, explicitly blamed Ravi and Wei for Clementi’s suicide. He said, “I don’t know how those two folks are going to sleep at night, knowing that they contributed to driving that young man to that alternative.”520 Ravi and Wei, thus, came to represent antigay bullies and, in turn, they became figures for projecting pervasive antigay attitudes. And in this instance, the projection of antigay hostilities was placed on two racial minorities. As Jasbir Puar writes, “Clementi’s suicide has predictably occasioned a vicious anti-Asian backlash replete with over-determined notions of ‘Asian homophobia’ and predictable calls to ‘go back to where you came from,’ as seen in numerous online articles.”521 Ravi and Wei were portrayed by many as both evil and un-American. The white, gay, youth, on the other hand, was included within the liberal national body. Ravi and Wei, two racial minorities, became non-American outsiders acting on apparently hate-filled antigay motives. In turn, average, straight, white,


Americans, such as the New Jersey Governor, were exempted from questioning the ways they harbor or act on attitudes that contribute to sexual shame.\textsuperscript{522}

Martyrs, as discussed in relation to Matthew Shepard, are meant to mark a dividing line, and Ravi and Wei were positioned as the epitomes of narrow-minded homophobes who made life difficult for gay teenagers. But herein lies one such problem with martyrial discourses and simple narratives of innocence and evil. In constructing Ravi and Wei as clear villains responsible for Clementi’s death, other aspects of society that are inhospitable to queers were made invisible and under-scrutinized. As scholar of early Christianity, Elizabeth Castelli, writes, “The lionizing of the martyr’s suffering, codified in the attributions of ‘innocence’ and ‘guilt,’ magnifies that suffering to such an extent that those who are charged with the responsibility for engendering it lose their claim to their own humanity.”\textsuperscript{523} While Ravi and Wei violated Clementi’s privacy and may have acted on antigay attitudes, turning them into Clementi’s murderers limits inquiry into other factors that contributed to his suicide. In making Ravi and Wei monsters, and in placing all blame for teenage suicide and trauma on “bullies,” more insidious forms of antigay oppression were not considered in Clementi’s death. While many queers, of all ages, experience trauma and harassment, simply speaking out against

\textsuperscript{522} As discussed in chapter four, a similar mechanism took place in relation to Matthew Shepard, especially in The Laramie Project where Shepard’s killers were portrayed as ignorant, poor, high school drop outs. In that instance, Shepard’s murderers were ostracized from mainstream America through issues of class and education. With Clementi, Ravi and Wei were ostracized, in part, through issues of race and nationality.

\textsuperscript{523} Elizabeth Castelli, Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 201.
“bullies” does little to undo oppressive heteronormative culture since, as Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini highlight, most people do not see themselves as hateful or identify as bullies.\textsuperscript{524} Americans can, therefore, condemn bullies and still tacitly contribute to reinforcing sexual hierarchies. Bullies become phantoms for projecting social ills that do not invite a full understanding of the insidious traumas faced by queers or the ways in which American sexual hierarchies are maintained and policed.\textsuperscript{525}

A few gay writers resisted placing all blame for Clementi’s death on Ravi and Wei in the weeks following his suicide. Richard Kim, for example, noted in The Nation that discussions of responsibility for Clementi and other gay teen suicides “focused almost exclusively on the bullies—other kids,” and that “[f]ew of the articles asked what home life was like for these gay teens or looked into what the role teachers, schools, and the broader community played in creating an environment where the only escape from such routine torment seemed death.”\textsuperscript{526} Here, Kim highlights how the national focus on bullies, a vague referent for social deviants, did little to expose institutional forms of antigay bigotry and oppression. Dan Savage similarly worried that little social change would occur if the locus of responsibility for Clementi’s death rested exclusively with Ravi and Wei, writing that, “other people may be more culpable: middle and high school

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\textsuperscript{524} See Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, \textit{Love the Sin}, 60.
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\textsuperscript{525} I am indebted to Ann Cvetkovich’s work for highlighting how the focus on catastrophes and death minimizes the many other ways in which trauma functions. See Ann Cvetkovich, \textit{An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).
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\textsuperscript{526} Richard Kim, “Against ‘Bullying’ or On Loving Queer Kids,” The Nation, last modified October 6, 2010, \url{http://www.thenation.com/blog/155219/against-bullying-or-loving-queer-kids}.
\end{flushright}
classmates who may have brutalized Tyler for years; school administrators who may have failed to protect him…Tyler’s own family may bear some responsibility for his decision to end his life.”

Kim and Savage were trying to open dialogue about the routinized forms of antigay hostility that are less visible because they are everywhere. In this regard, they were attempting to highlight an argument that Michael Warner makes when he says that, “It seldom occurs to anyone that the dominant culture and its family environment should be held accountable for creating inequalities of access and recognition that produce this sense of shame in the first place.” In other words, many queers feel humiliation about their sexual desires because they grew up in heterosexual nuclear families that esteemed straight, married familial formations as the only legitimate option, which mainstream religious institutions similarly promoted, that the media repeatedly packaged and distributed, and that the government privileged with extensive benefits.

Ravi and Wei, according to this thinking, undeniably violated Clementi’s privacy, but they might have had less to do with Clementi’s suicide than his own family, or the antigay and pro-heterosexual messages that Clementi received from the media, from religious leaders, and from politicians.

While Kim, Savage, and select others attempted to create a broader understanding of Clementi’s death, they nevertheless reinscribed a martyrial dividing line of “us” and

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“them,” in this case of innocent gays and villainous straights.\textsuperscript{529} Missing from the martyrial us/them division that places blame either on Ravi and Wei or on pervasive homophobia is the role of normalizing disciplinary regimes in American gay communities. The policing of sexuality and bodies is hardly limited to society’s dominant class. As queer theorist, David Halperin, writes “Gay life has generated its own disciplinary regimes, its own techniques of normalization, in the form of obligatory haircuts, T-shirts, dietary practices, body piercing, leather accoutrements, and physical exercise.”\textsuperscript{530} In other words, “gay life” includes its own hierarchies that, in certain spheres especially for gay men, prize muscular bodies and fashion model aesthetics. What, then, if Clementi felt excluded from both straight society and normative gay culture? What if he was despondent about not fitting particular ideals of gay masculinity that prize expensive clothes, gym-toned bodies, and sexually-charged confidence? What if he not only felt outing by his roommate, but also that he would never fit what he imagined life to be for gay men? In other words, exclusive focus on the humiliation produced by straight culture fails to account for the shaming mechanisms within gay spheres that can operate separately or in tandem with the insidious antigay attitudes

\textsuperscript{529} Jay Michaelson, a gay legal and religion scholar, also published several opinion pieces during Dharun Ravi’s trial arguing that Ravi did not exhibit more homophobia than most people and institutions within straight society. Similarly, the gay former governor of New Jersey, Jim McGreevey, also published an opinion piece claiming that Ravi should not be the “scapegoat” for all the ways in which the country is inhospitable to gays. See, Jay Michaelson, “Can Suicide Be a Hate Crime,” \textit{Newsweek}, March 19, 2012, 17. See also, Jim McGreevey, “Jim McGreevey: Don’t Make Dharun Ravi Our Anti-Gay Scapegoat,” \textit{Star-Ledger} (Newark, NJ), April 29, 2012.

circulating throughout American society. A narrow focus on bullies and a reduction of sexual shame to simple binaries of good and evil fails to account for the multitude of ways in which hierarchies of sexuality are maintained and regulated in the United States.

The Martyr as an Agent of Religious Conversion

Just as Matthew Shepard’s murder marked a discursive dividing line that separated “bad” religion, like the Westboro Baptist Church, from “good” religion that was tolerant of gays, the widespread focus on Clementi’s suicide posed a challenge to large antigay religious groups because of how they could be rendered complicit in teenage trauma and suicide. As one minister said of Clementi, “There’s no religion on the face of the earth that countenances the taunting to death of children.” Hating adolescents, even if they were gay, was not socially acceptable in 2010, especially hating teenagers to death. With the national notoriety of his suicide, Clementi became a focus for many Christian groups opposed to homosexuality, thereby prompting them to re-think the ramifications of their rhetoric. Gay activists had tried to establish a causal link between the religious right’s condemnation of homosexuality and Matthew Shepard’s murder twelve years earlier by asserting that ex-gay advertisements contributed to his death. In the intervening years, white gays like Clementi had reached a level of acceptance in the United States that facilitated increased circumspection of those who condemned, in particular, gay youth.

Following Clementi’s suicide and the ensuing outpouring of outrage, several conservative Christian organizations tried to situate themselves in ways that did not give the appearance that their beliefs contributed to antigay bullying or teen suicide. For example, less than a month after Clementi’s death, Exodus International, the largest ex-gay ministry in the US at the time,\footnote{Less than three years later, in June 2013, the president of Exodus International ceased its operations and apologized to gay Americans for claiming that sexual orientation could be changed. See, for example, Ian Lovett, “After 37 Years of Trying to Change People’s Sexual Orientation, Group is to Disband,” \textit{New York Time} (New York, NY), June 20, 2013.} removed its sponsorship from the annual “Day of Truth,” a yearly event designed for Christian teenagers to “express their disapproval of homosexuality.”\footnote{Adelle Banks, “After Teen Suicides, Gay Opponents Look Inward,” States News Service, October 26, 2010.} Following Clementi’s suicide, Exodus International’s president admitted that he experienced damaging antigay bullying as a teenager. He also asserted that he did not want his group to contribute to the harassment that he believed led to Clementi’s suicide. That same month the Mormon Church released a statement encouraging Mormons to be, “sensitive to the vulnerable in society and be willing to speak out against bullying or intimidation whenever it occurs, including unkindness toward those who are attracted to others of the same sex.”\footnote{Michael Otterson quoted in Adelle Banks, “After Teen Suicides, Gay Opponents Look Inward,” States News Service, October 26, 2010.} The Mormon Church did not change its official position on homosexuality, but such a statement reveals some of the ways in which public condemnation of gays and lesbians was increasingly circumscribed after Clementi’s suicide through rhetoric of vulnerable adolescents. The president of the
Southern Baptist Theological Seminary followed suit and publically acknowledged that he was torn by Clementi’s suicide and demurred that “evangelical pastors” and “Bible-believing Christians” had contributed to Clementi’s sense of shame. The Baptist leader reaffirmed that homosexuality was a sin, but he called for Christians to find a way to embrace those who are pulled to homosexuality. More than a year later an entertainment website produced by Focus on the Family, the massive conservative Christian and antigay organization, published a list of 2011’s “biggest shakers and breakers” in popular culture. At number six, a year after he died, was Tyler Clementi, whose death they wrote, “was a critical reminder that, even when we disagree with someone’s choice or lifestyle, we must always treat that person with respect, dignity, and compassion.”

Focus on the Family, like other religious groups that did not support or promote gay equality, wanted to appear compassionate and avoid the impression that their beliefs about homosexuality as a “choice or lifestyle” contributed to teen suicide.

Clementi was also invoked by some liberal Protestant clergy as a symbol for why all Christians needed to be accepting of gays. For instance, the week after Clementi


536 For a scholarly discussion of the abundance of antigay rhetoric that has been produced by Focus on the Family, see Ludger H. Viefhues-Bailey, Between a Man and a Woman?: Why Conservatives Oppose Same-Sex Marriage (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

committed suicide, Reverend Debra Haffner, executive director of the interfaith Religious Institute, sent a letter to more than 2,000 clergy requesting that their next sermons focus specifically on Tyler Clementi’s suicide and the need to support gay Americans. In turn, the Washington Post published Haffner’s letter, which concludes with a quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Protestant theologian who tried to assassinate Hitler, saying, “Silence in the face of evil is itself evil…Not to act is to act.” Haffner, thus, used Clementi’s death to situate religious responses to homosexuality as either good or evil, as actively helping gays or as contributing to their suicides through silence. Good Christians, according to this division, were engaged in battle, and young lives were on the line. Clementi’s story about cyberbullying and teenage suicide, therefore, also quickly became a story about religious views on homosexuality in twenty-first century America. Clementi, in turn, was used by a vast spectrum of American Christians to, in

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540 Haffner reports that she heard from several clergy who followed her request and preached from the pulpit about Tyler Clementi. She says that the clergy were, “Episcopal, Roman Catholic, Baptist, Disciples of Christ, United Church of Christ, Unitarian Universalist.” See Debra Haffner, “Sexual and Gender Diversity Enriches Us All,” FaithStreet.com, last modified October 13, 2010, http://www.faithstreet.com/onfaith/2010/10/13/dearly-beloved-sexual-and-gender-diversity-enriches-us-all/4904.
some instances, advocate for greater acceptance of gays and lesbians, and, in other instances, to distance themselves from accusations that their beliefs contributed to gay teen suicide.

One Christian whose ideas about religion and homosexuality underwent an especially public transformation was Tyler Clementi’s mother, Jane Clementi. Martyrs, as discussed in earlier chapters, are meant to encourage conversion. As Joyce Salisbury explains, “[T]he death of each martyr [was to have] stimulated the conversion of many more.”\footnote{Joyce Salisbury, \textit{The Blood of Martyrs: Unintended Consequences of Ancient Violence} (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1.} Clementi’s mother became the model convert of someone who had once condemned homosexuality because of her religious convictions, but who, after Clementi’s death, came to believe that gays are equally loved by God. Less than two years after his suicide, Clementi’s parents gave interviews to multiple media outlets announcing that they had stopped attending their longtime church because of the institution’s position on homosexuality. The Clementis had belonged to Grace Church, a nondenominational Evangelical church in their hometown of Ridgewood, New Jersey. All three of their sons were raised in that religious community, including Tyler who was an active participant in worship services and youth group activities. According to Tyler’s older brother, their mother found Tyler’s Bible after he died. Inside she discovered notes Tyler had taken during a youth group lesson that “condemned homosexuals as sinners that needed God’s will to turn away from their immoral lifestyles.”\footnote{James Clementi, “A Brother’s Pledge: Standing Up for Love,” \textit{Huffington Post}, last modified September 13, 2013, \url{http://www.huffingtonpost.com/james-clementi/a-brothers-pledge-standing-up-for-love_b_3894297.html}.} In an interview
with the *New York Times*, Jane Clementi confessed that when Tyler announced he was gay, “she believed that homosexuality was a sin, as her evangelical church taught.”\textsuperscript{543} Clementi’s mother, employing rhetoric of an us/them dividing line, situated herself as someone who had been involved in flawed religion. But after her son’s death she crossed over to the side of truth and acceptance of homosexuality. Clementi’s mother revealed that she had been particularly struck by something Tyler had said the day he came out to her: that he did not see how he could be gay and Christian. She, however, believed that he loved Christ and that Christ loved him. After he killed himself, Clementi’s mother said she “took strength from reading the Bible as she reconsidered her views.”\textsuperscript{544} Clementi’s parents subsequently left their church and announced to media outlets that countless religious communities were at fault for the shame surrounding homosexuality.

That news publications such as the *New York Times* were interested in Jane Clementi’s conversion story almost two years after Tyler’s death reveals the ongoing attention his suicide received. The publicity given to her conversion also highlights that, by 2012, many mainline and evangelical Christian communities were grappling with similar issues about homosexuality and the pain caused by excluding gay and lesbian Christians. Sociologist Dawne Moon has observed that twenty-first century debates about homosexuality in conservative Christian communities commonly focus on the theme of gay pain, writing that, “Given the overwhelming belief in the importance of Christian

\textsuperscript{543} Kate Zernike, “After Gay Son’s Suicide, Mother Finds Blame in Herself and in Her Church,” *New York Times* (New York, NY), Aug. 24, 2012.

\textsuperscript{544} Ibid.
love and compassion, it comes as no surprise that a theme of relieving pain figures
prominently in current moves to include gay people in the life of the church.”545 After her
conversion, Jane Clementi became a visible spokesperson for why Christians should
extend love to gays and lesbians. In one article for the Huffington Post she admonished
that, “By not recognizing the love of our gay brothers and sisters in Christ, we tell them
that their love is not valid or valued. This causes our gay youth to also think that their
love and possibly even they themselves are ‘less than.’”546 Using language of protecting
“gay youth” from pain, Clementi’s mother called for Christian communities to welcome
gays and lesbians as equals in Christ. In many ways, then, she still spreads an evangelical
gospel, but now she connects Jesus’ love to gays. When best-selling evangelical author,
David Gushee, published a controversial book in 2014 calling on evangelicals to accept
gays and lesbians as equals, Jane Clementi penned part of the book’s preface where she
wrote, “Praise God for patiently guiding each of us to this place of new understanding as
God moves the Church into the 21st century.”547

For Clementi’s mother, and representing a larger trend within church debates
about homosexuality, sexual orientation was not only fixed at birth, but something

545 Dawne Moon, God, Sex, and Politics: Homosexuality and Everyday Theologies

546 Jane Clementi, “Loving All God’s Children Equally,” Huffington Post, last modified
equally_b_5176554.html.

547 Jane Clementi quoted in David Gushee, Changing Our Minds (Canton, MI: David
Crum Media, 2014), xiii.
created by God as part of His plan for humanity. Lesbians and gays, like her son, were born gay. In Jane Clementi’s evangelical lexicon, “born gay” was connected to God’s divine intentions. Her advocacy to reconcile Christianity with homosexuality attracted national attention and regular speaking engagements, thereby also exposing that, in the years following Clementi’s suicide, many American audiences, including conservative Christian communities, were willing to entertain ideas about how homosexuality might be reconciled with longstanding religious teachings. In 2013 the New Yorker magazine named Jane Clementi one of the “Top Ten Gay-Rights Heroes of 2013.” That same year the Washington National Cathedral hosted a panel in honor of “LGBT youth.” The panel included three speakers, two of whom were Jane Clementi and Judy Shepard, Matthew Shepard’s mother. Discussion of gay youth at the National Cathedral was, thus, framed through death. And Clementi’s mother, someone who once condemned homosexuality because of her religious convictions, was welcomed into the country’s National Cathedral to speak on why American Christians should embrace gays as equals.

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550 For a description of the event, and to watch a video recording, see “Honoring LGBT Youth,” NationalCathedral.org, last modified October 6, 2013, http://www.nationalcathedral.org/events/SF20131006.shtml#.VIJ0jzHF-AU.
The Rush to Redemption

A prominent feature of martyr narratives is that they are often structured with redemptive responses, with strategies for giving death meaning through promises of a transformed society. According to this approach, good will win out over evil and the world will improve because the martyr died. As illustrated in relation to Milk and Shepard, one of the ways that Christianity maintains dominance in the United States is through discourses that reproduce Christian concepts as American values. One such example is the idea that death is not defeat, but a site for renewing the social order. As scholar of religion in antiquity, David Frankfurter, writes, “Inversion of pain, torment, and death become a principal theme of Christian narrative culture.”

In terms of Christian theology, inversion is the process by which suffering transforms into redemption. Jesus’ death was not defeat, but the promise of salvation. The martyrs, in turn, endured horrific sacrificial deaths so society might be renewed. Clementi’s death was similarly inverted from tragedy into transformative potential. In this way, Clementi’s suicide was given purpose through claims that society changed because he died. For example, the executive director of Garden State Equality, a New Jersey gay advocacy organization, said that, “Tyler’s passing had a massive public-policy impact in the state of New Jersey.” In unambiguous terms, this gay rights advocate claimed that Clementi’s death positively transformed New Jersey. As was a common reaction to both


Milk and Shepard’s deaths, Clementi’s suicide went from the tragic to the promise of possibilities. The executive director of Garden State Equality made this proclamation three and a half months after Clementi’s death when New Jersey legislators passed an anti-bullying bill into law, saying, “Clearly, Tyler Clementi was in every legislator’s mind, as both houses acted with unprecedented speed and passed the bill with overwhelming bipartisan support.” Following this logic, had Clementi not died, the law might not have been enacted or approved so quickly. His death made the bill possible and united people of every political persuasion. This redemptive reading of Clementi’s suicide gives his death meaning and purpose. Based on this veiled and ubiquitous Christian thinking, others will live in a better world because Clementi died.

*Philadelphia Gay News’* decision to name Clementi the “2010 Person of the Year” is a similar attempt to redeem his suicide and to insist that good came out of death. By designating Clementi as the most important person of the year and listing the aspects of society that they believe changed because of his suicide, the editors of the gay publication tacitly thank Clementi for taking his life. As with the common Christian theological trope, Clementi died so others may live. Similarly, three and a half years after Clementi’s suicide, Broadway producer Stephen Schwartz, of such shows as *Pippin* and *Godspell*, co-created a musical production about Clementi entitled *Tyler’s Suite*. The show was commissioned by six Gay Men’s Choruses throughout the country. *Tyler’s Suite* premiered in March 2014 and was advertised as a “story [that] is one of hope and

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553 Ibid.
encouragement for families everywhere.”\textsuperscript{554} Although Clementi killed himself, the musical transposes his suicide from a despondent death into a promise of “hope and encouragement.” Thus, far from walls of institutional Christianity, Clementi’s death has been recounted by gay advocates in secular spheres according to a Christian narrative arc that moves from the abysmal to the purposeful, from suffering to redemption.

Christian motifs of redemptive suffering, as well as other liberal Protestant ideas, also circulate throughout the It Gets Better project. I return to a brief discussion of the It Gets Better project so I can further analyze how redemption has been offered to queer teenagers in relation to Clementi’s suicide. It Gets Better is steeped in Protestant-inflected language and concepts.\textsuperscript{555} But Dan Savage, the project’s creator, never explicitly suggests that the path to a better life is through assimilation to Protestant norms. Savage, in fact, views religion with special suspicion. In his article, “Who Killed Tyler Clementi,” Savage lashes out at Christian communities for condemning gays.\textsuperscript{556}

\textsuperscript{554} See, for example, “‘Tyler’s Suite’ World Premiere in San Francisco this March,” TylerClementi.org, last accessed September 1, 2014, \url{http://www.tylerclementi.org/news-activities/tylers-suite-world-premiere-in-san-francisco-this-march}.

\textsuperscript{555} For instance, the central premise of It Gets Better is predicated on a Christian teleological promise that paradise follows pain, that the inflicted shall inherit a better world. While such a teleological narrative is indicative of a general Christian temporality that moves from the dark legalism of Judaism into the light of Christianity and Jesus’ second coming, in It Gets Better each individual must believe, a crucial component of Protestant salvation, in the project’s promise. As Savage declares in his video testimonial, “I promise you, it will get better.” Using the suicides of teenagers, the project’s genesis is in death, and its promise in glorious life. In the spirit of Protestant revivalism, sufferers will be born again into new and better lives. One just needs to have faith in what Savage preaches and in what thousands of others testify.

For Savage, secular spheres are the places where gay possibilities flourish. But as numerous scholars have illuminated, the secular is not simply a religious void. The Protestant Reformation, as Max Weber and subsequent scholars have made clear, extricated religious authority from the papal church hierarchy and displaced it in insidious ways throughout society. While the secular is not necessarily or simply covert religion, Protestant ideas can and do shape various aspects of purportedly secular discursive spaces. One instantiation of this is the American sexual ethos that has been shaped by Protestant Christian values. As the dominant sexual ethos, social actors, like Savage and the other contributors to It Gets Better, are not always keenly aware of how they subscribe to or promote hegemonic Protestant ideas because of how Protestant ideas operate under the veiled banner of the secular. It Gets Better inculcates ideas about gay social inclusion by promoting particular Protestant ideas even as the project is positioned outside of, and in some ways in antagonism with, religious institutions.

One way that It Gets Better instils redemptive ideas in relation to Clementi’s suicide and gay teen suffering is by valorizing the Protestant sexual ethos as the ideal way to obtain happiness, overcome bullying, and achieve acceptance in America. Awaiting gay teenagers after they endure brutality, according to the It Gets Better script, is love, long-term romantic partnerships, and parenting. Adolescent suffering is redeemed

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557 Weber writes that the “Reformation meant not the elimination of the church’s control over everyday life, but rather the substitution of a new form of control for the previous one. It meant the repudiation of a control that was very lax, at that time scarcely perceptible in practice and hardly more than formal in favor of a regulation of the whole conduct which, penetrating all departments of private and public life, was infinitely burdensome and earnestly enforced.” See Max Weber, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (New York: Scribner’s, 1930), 36.
when formerly gay youth find someone to marry. Religion writer for the *New York Times*, Mark Oppenheimer, summarizes the It Gets Better narrative by proffering that, “It Gets Better is, in the end, a paean to stable families: it is a promise to gay youth that if they can just survive the bullying, they can have spouses and children when they grow up.”

Savage and his husband, Terry Miller, spend much time in the campaign’s inaugural video describing how they met, fell in love, and got married, making it clear that, from their vantage point, a better life entails lifelong romantic commitment to one person. For Savage, having created a nuclear family is proof of his teleological promise. Savage’s marriage and child are used as evidence to support the project’s redemptive claims. It Gets Better is, thus, a reinforcement of life scripts that lead to domestication, to gay life getting better through containment to the home, to one spouse, and to the rearing of children. Similarly, Mark Oppenheimer describes Savage’s investment in It Gets Better by writing:

> With Savage, the goal is always the possibility of stable, adult families, for gays and straights alike. He is capable of pro-family rants that, stripped of his habitual profanity, would be indistinguishable from Christian-right fund-raising letters…He does not believe in promiscuity; indeed, his attacks on the anonymous-sex, gay-bathhouse culture was once taken as proof of a secret conservative agenda.

The prescriptive parameters of It Gets Better are not meant to include lives that are sustained through public sex, lesbian communes, drug-fueled circuit parties, or polyamorous familial formations. Romantic relationships composed of more than two

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559 Ibid.
people are not offered as a “better” life to queer adolescents in response to Clementi’s death. Clementi may have died after having sex with someone he recently met on the internet, but in the It Gets Better script, an acceptable, better life takes place through long-term coupling where sex occurs primarily in the private sphere.

For the thousands so moved by Clementi’s suicide that they uploaded it-gets-better videos, the life offered to end suffering was primarily one of assimilation. It Gets Better does not simply promise bullied teenagers that life will improve; the campaign instructs them on how to have a good life and how to avoid suicidal thoughts by reinscribing particular familial formations as ideal, acceptable, and normal. While many non-Protestant traditions in the US, especially in the present moment, esteem similar sexual practices, the exclusive sexual ideal of marriage to one person and the containment of sex to the marital bed is linked to Protestant history, a history replete with condemnation and criminalization of those who transgressed Protestant standards. As discussed in earlier chapters, Catholics and Christian movements like the Mormons, Shakers, and Oneida Perfectionists that exalted other sexual practices – including celibacy or group marriage – as ideals, were commonly circumscribed, and criminalized.

560 American literature scholar, Mark Rifkin, writing on how Native Americans were expected to assimilate to Protestant sexual and gender norms, has termed the tendency to imagine gay life as flourishing through parameters that resemble Protestant heteronormativity as the “bribe of straightness.” See Mark Rifkin, When Did Indians Become Straight?: Kinship, the History of Sexuality, and Native Sovereignty (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 23.

561 This argument fits well with Gayle Rubin’s construction of the “charmed circle,” where she shows how the best chance sexual minorities have for acceptance is to behave like those already regarded as normal, as in monogamous, married, couples. See her essay “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality” in Gayle Rubin, Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).
as heretics and as un-American. In turn, It Gets Better reinscribes the Protestant sexual ethos as ideal and subverts it only to the extent that an acceptable matrimonial couple contains two husbands or two wives. The It Gets Better project promises redemption from gay suffering through prescriptions to comport to particular Protestant values.

The success of It Gets Better as a response to Clementi’s suicide underscores, in part, the pervasiveness of unnamed Protestant ideas in America. Suffering does not, despite certain pronouncements, necessarily lead to redemption. That is a particular Christian idea ostensibly born in Jesus’ death and offered as a promise to others. And yet that Christian concept circulates as a basic assumption in American thought that was used in the advocacy surrounding Tyler Clementi. As Jasbir Puar writes, “[Dan] Savage has also mastered…the technique of converting Clementi’s injury into cultural capital, not only through affectations of blame, guilt, and suffering but also through those of triumph, transgression, and success.” It Gets Better has, in many ways, functioned as a collective effort to redeem Clementi’s death through the particular Christian strategy of converting his suicide from degradation into a promise of prosperity, a prosperity predicated, in this case, on assimilation to Protestant ideals.

Concluding Thoughts

As the queer death that evoked the greatest outpouring of activism since Matthew Shepard’s murder, Tyler Clementi’s suicide exposed how national outrage over queer deaths in America have been narrowly limited to young, white, Christian men. Violent attacks on lesbians, suicides of bisexuals, and murders of transgender Americans have

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largely gone unnoticed. By 2010 Clementi was understood as on the precipice of full American citizenship. His suicide was depicted as a tragedy worthy of addressing so that the (white) gay progress narrative could be reinstated. The impact of Clementi’s death, though, was not simply limited to those who already supported gay rights. As a white evangelical, Clementi’s story also evoked discussions within conservative Christian communities about the role of religious rhetoric in traumatizing gay teenagers. Had Clementi been an African American Muslim, for example, the response to his suicide from Christian communities, and perhaps from most media outlets, could have been dramatically different and not nearly as prevalent.

Turning Tyler Clementi into the most well-known gay teen suicide has an irony to it. He was initially understood as having killed himself because he was humiliated that people knew about his sexuality. Making his death a spectacle and him the emblem of tormented gay teens potentially further violates the privacy that he had, in theory, wanted to protect. Queer theorist, Heather Love, has written on how historical figures now claimed as gay or lesbian might never agree to be associated with the political movements that have invoked them as icons and as role models.\textsuperscript{563} In a similar vein, what does it mean to make Clementi a symbol of gay youth when he may not have wanted to be one, when he had no opportunity to give consent to have his story used or reconfigured into political advocacy and a message of hope? Is violence done to Clementi through efforts to redeem his death? While answers to these questions must be

speculative, Clementi has nevertheless been emblemized as something he might not have wanted to claim publicly.

The reductive construction of gay youth to vulnerable victims in the discourses surrounding Clementi configures gays as non-threatening figures. By 2010 empathy for gays like Clementi was largely achieved through “born gay” rhetoric, thereby positioning gayness as something a person would never choose on one’s own because of pervasive antigay hostilities made manifest in bullies. But the focus on “bullies,” and the promise that “it gets better,” does little to acknowledge or upend the myriad ways in which queers of all ages are traumatized, especially if they look nothing like Tyler Clementi. Moreover, in the Clementi and It Gets Better archives, the redemptive promise offered to tormented teenagers is that their suffering will cease when they meet someone to marry and assimilate to a life that looks like domesticated heterosexual nuclear families. Redemption, therefore, apparently comes with comportment to the liberal Protestant norms that shape ideas about acceptable American citizens. Despite how Clementi’s death was framed as redemptive, the social renewal presented was much less of a radical social revolution for diverse gender and sexual freedoms and more of reinstatement of American social and sexual hierarchies that, instead of exclusively prescribing heterosexual marriage, also included same-sex marriage as acceptable in the twenty-first century.
Chapter 6

Conclusion

Every November congregants at San Francisco’s Metropolitan Community Church display a cross in honor of “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Martyrs.” Three pictures hang on that cross. At the top is a picture of Matthew Shepard, smiling and dressed in a plaid button-down shirt. In the center is a photograph of the fence where Shepard was bound and beaten. At the bottom is a picture of Harvey Milk, smiling and sporting a suit. Written on the left and right sides of the cross, without accompanying images, are the names of other martyrs such as Gwen Araujo and Roxanne Ellis, a transgender woman and a lesbian who were both murdered. The congregation of predominantly gay Protestants, consequently, commemorates Americans other than just Milk, Shepard, and Clementi as martyrs. And yet, those other martyrs are inscribed on the periphery of the community’s memorial. Their marginality is actualized in the act of commemoration. In turn, occupying the central space, and the only martyr to have two pictures on the cross, is Matthew Shepard. He is the focus of the memorial’s veneration, the martyr who must be remembered. The one other image on the cross is of Harvey Milk. The Christian community, thus, honors the Jewish Milk by hanging him on a cross.

The MCC martyr cross raises several questions about the interplay between secular gay advocacy and gay-friendly Christian communities. For one, was Harvey Milk’s Jewishness diminished to such an extent within secular gay advocacy that this

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Protestant community no longer remembers that he was a Jew? Or, have they placed Milk on the cross so he can be exalted, like the Jewish Jesus, as a savior figure? Similarly, have secular gay advocates, and mainstream media, venerated Matthew Shepard so greatly that the creators of the MCC martyr cross assume his images will produce a better mix of sadness and triumph than any other person? Were the names of murdered lesbians, queers of color, and transgender Americans placed on the periphery because secular gay advocates have not promoted their memory in ways commensurate to that of Milk and Shepard?

“Martyrdom and American Gay History” has been an attempt to make sense of the politics of martyrdom, to understand why particular people have been upheld as gay martyrs. Martyrdom, after all, is not simply about mourning. Harvey Milk, Matthew Shepard, and Tyler Clementi resemble the American dominant class of white, male, college-educated, middle-class Protestants. The focus in much of the advocacy surrounding these figures has been to garner empathy from the dominant class, to convert attitudes about homosexuality by constructing gays as remarkably similar to straights. In turn, gay martyr discourses largely reveal strategies for assimilation, not for radical social revolution.

Martyrdom does not have a natural or fixed connection to assimilation. Although Tertullian and subsequent generations of Church Fathers used martyrdom as a tool for promoting conversion, early Christian martyrs were, in many ways, diverse social outcasts. In fact, Christian martyrs included many women from lower classes who were
beloved and venerated by countless Christian communities. While martyrs were esteemed as exemplary Christians, they did not necessarily resemble the ruling or dominant culture. Martyrdom, in other words, does not have to be an assimilatory strategy. Gay, or queer, martyrdom in the United States could, therefore, include a far more capacious spectrum of sexual and gender outcasts. If gay advocates want to create and exalt martyrs, the martyrs could represent diverse sexual, gender, and racial possibilities. Martyrdom could be used as a tool for venerating ways of living that deconstruct dominant ideologies of binary genders, sexual orientation, and romantic coupling. And aspects of martyrs’ lives that do not fit within dominant social expectations, such as Harvey Milk’s promotion of polyamory, could be exalted as one possibility among many, rather than be erased from memory.

One of my overarching concerns with the present discourses of American gay martyrdom is that they rely on Christian ideas. The Christian theological concept of redemptive suffering recurrently appears throughout these discourses. Despite the pervasiveness of this Christian concept, suffering does not have an intrinsic purpose. To suggest that it does is to engage in a meaning-making strategy deeply indebted to Christianity and to the legacy of Christian martyrdom. Similarly, death does not inherently transform the world. To claim that good comes out of death is, again, to promote a Christian perspective that locates salvation and redemption in particular

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deaths. Rendering murder as meaningful, or suicide as a sacrifice, is to insist that truth is located in death and that good will win out over evil. Such a meaning-making process is foundational to the Christian narration of Jesus’ death and to the deaths of the Christian martyrs. When gay advocates proclaim that Milk, Shepard, and Clementi’s deaths created a better world because they died, they promote a veiled Christian ethic that finds possibility for social transformation in death. Such assertions contribute to Christian dominance in the United States through the circulation of ideas that appear universal because of their ubiquity despite their particular origins in Christian theology.

An additional, and related, concern is that the present discourses of gay martyrdom largely promote the Protestant sexual ethos as necessary for acceptable American citizenship. Harvey Milk’s polyamorous sex life and views about maintaining multiple concurrent romantic relationships were mostly erased so he would not be remembered as someone who encouraged a sexual standard outside of coupled monogamy. Similarly, Matthew Shepard was depicted as a desexualized adolescent so he could represent a gay American who did not transgress the Protestant sexual ethos. And Tyler Clementi was presented as a gay teen who kept sex contained to the private sphere, not as someone who pursued sex in public spaces or in groups. To be an acceptable gay American, according to these martyr discourses, is to confine sexual possibilities to the norms of the Protestant sexual ethos through coupled, domesticated monogamy. Rather than promoting diverse sexual possibilities and freedoms, these discourses largely suggest that all Americans must comport as closely as possible to Protestant sexual standards in order to be regarded as legitimate citizens.
A common critique of American national gay advocacy is that much of it is dominated by white gay men and their priorities. Missing from that accurate critique is the role of Christian dominance within secular American gay advocacy. Part of the elision of Christian dominance in American gay advocacy is attributable to the history of Christian antigay rhetoric. From Anita Bryant’s crusade against gays to proclamations that AIDS was punishment for the sin of homosexuality, American gay history since the 1970s is replete with examples of Christians publically condemning gays as abominations and as unfit for full American citizenship. Christianity, from this perspective, has been not only oppositional to gay activism, but incompatible with the promotion of gay rights. While such a historical picture of ongoing tensions between conservative Christians and gay advocates is, in many ways, accurate, that narrative also obfuscates how Christianity has been used as a tool for gay assimilation. As the gay martyr discourses highlight, gay advocates, especially in the shadow of AIDS, positioned gays according to Protestant Christian standards in order to present themselves as civilized, respectable citizens. Matthew Shepard’s enormous popularity was, in part, connected to how he was configured as a practicing Protestant, a gay adolescent committed to a mainline Protestant denomination. His race, class, gender, education, age, and size also played important roles in his notoriety. But Shepard countered the image of gays as godless adults. He symbolized an American who was both Christian and gay, which, in many ways, helped him function as an ideal gay citizen and as an ideal gay martyr.

Christian ideas and motifs were habitually used to promote Milk, Shepard, and Clementi as respectable citizens worthy of empathy and admiration. The pervasiveness of framing them as Christ-like, as redeemed sacrifices, and as adherers to the Protestant
sexual ethos exposes how gay advocates have contributed to Protestant Christian
dominance in the United States. Although countless conservative Christians have
publically condemned gays as second-class citizens, Christian ideas and rhetoric have
been crucial in facilitating American gay assimilation. Discourses of gay martyrdom
reveal that Protestant Christianity has been an instrumental conduit for promoting, and
for foreclosing, the parameters of gay acceptance in America. Secular gay advocates who
wanted assimilation, not a radical reconceptualization of sexual norms, inverted the
Christian rhetoric deployed against them and made Christianity a tool to present gays as
normal, acceptable, American citizens.


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