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Internalized Homophobia in AIDS plays: an analysis of Larry Kramer's

The Normal Heart* and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America

BA Thesis

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Abstract

The AIDS epidemic in the United States has left a significant mark in the American queer consciousness, literature, and theatre. The aim of this thesis is to look at *The Normal Heart* and *Angels in America*, as examples of two generations of AIDS plays, to analyze how internalized homophobia, spurred into the limelight by the rapidly evolving AIDS epidemic, is represented in the two plays: as a universal gay experience that appears to be morally ambiguous or as something negative that impedes LGBT progress? An empirical analysis was written on both plays in question to explore the effect of internalized homophobia on their characters. It was found that internalized homophobia was portrayed as something negative in both plays, but this portrayal was more nuanced and closer to an unproblematic depiction in the second generation play *Angels in America*.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. AIDS

The AIDS epidemic was one of the most significant events of the 1980s, especially for the LGBTQ community. It is only natural that it, like other significant events in world history, inspired authors to write fictional treatments in different genres. The genre of AIDS plays is an example of AIDS literature that can today be divided into two separate generations.

To understand the nature of the AIDS plays, it is imperative that AIDS as a disease be understood first. AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome) is a disease caused by HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus), the virus that targets white blood cells, compromising the human immune system. HIV can be transmitted through unprotected anal, vaginal, or oral intercourse, shared syringes, and needles, blood transfusion or through transmission from mother to child either in the womb, during childbirth or through breastfeeding. (American Foundation for AIDS Research 2021)

Although the history of AIDS is believed to go back to 1920, to the Republic of Congo, it was not until the 1970s that the epidemic started globally. This latency can be attributed to a lack of symptoms upon transmission, a sporadic recording of cases prior to the 1970s and limited opportunities for travel. (Avert 2019)

It was in the 1980s that the epidemic reached its height in the US, severely affecting the LGBT population. In 1987, the death toll in the USA had reached 40 000 and protests erupted in New York against the complacency of the government. (Aizenman 2019)

In 1996 a treatment was devised to help people keep living with AIDS, although no cure has been found for the HIV virus. (Avert 2019)

As of 2019, 38 million people around the world were living with HIV, with 7 million being unaware of it. 690 000 people died from AIDS in 2019, which is a 39% decrease from 2010, according to UNAIDS. The risk of contracting HIV is 26 times higher among gay and bisexual men and 13 times higher for trans people. However, they are not the only vulnerable population: risk is 29 times higher for people using drugs through injection and 30 times higher for sex workers. Although most new HIV cases are attributed to male-on-male sexual intercourse, the alarming infection rates for drug users and sex workers shows that the virus should not be treated as an exclusively LGBT problem, as it has been in the past. (UNAIDS 2020)

1.2. AIDS in Politics

“Look pretty and do as little research as you can.” (Francis 2012) Those were the guidelines received by CDC from Washington during the peak of the AIDS epidemic, as recorded by Donald P. Francis. Francis shows how the Reagan administration knew little about the disease and failed to understand the severity of the epidemic. The lack of funding prevented the CDC from taking the aggressive action that would otherwise be taken at the start of an epidemic. Only able to implement half-measures, the CDC wasted precious time trying to get help from Washington. This was made even more difficult by the new head of the CDC, a conservative who did not wish to go against the administration. The White House directed the CDC to share money between its projects and rejected the request for 37 million dollars to fight the ever-evolving AIDS situation. Francis concludes his paper by writing: “Ignoring AIDS was an active policy on Reagan’s part”. (Francis 2012)

In response to the government's mishandling of the situation, ACT UP or the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power was formed in March of 1987. Wall Street was the home to their first demonstration on 24 March, during which seventeen people are arrested, but as an indirect result the FDA cuts its drug approval process by two years. 4 June of the same year, ACT UP protested Northwest Orient Airlines decision to deny travel to people with AIDS. Two lawsuits were levied against the airline, forcing it to reverse the decision. (ACT UP n.d.)

On the first anniversary of ACT UP when the protestors returned to Wall Street on March 24, 1988 over a hundred people were arrested. This, however, prompted wide-spread media coverage of both ACT UP and the AIDS crisis, bringing AIDS activism into the limelight. On October 11, 1988, ACT UP closed down the FDA with over 1000 activists present, bringing their fight against the snail-paced bureaucracy in charge of testing potential AIDS treatments in front of the international press. In 1989, another historical protest on Wall Street helped to lower the prices of AZT – a medication used to treat AIDS – by 20%. In March of 1990, the Needle Exchange Committee under ACT UP started working towards making needles and injections safer for AIDS prevention. (ACT UP n.d.) In addition to pointing the media's eyes to the ongoing AIDS crisis and policy failures, ACT UP advocated for better sex education and created groups both for youth and women action, acting as a flagship group against AIDS and the government's failures and unwillingness to tackle it. (ACT UP n.d.).

1.3. AIDS and Literature

The spread of the epidemic produced a wave of authors wanting to catalogue their experiences of living with and losing friends and family to AIDS. This genre of AIDS

literature grew to be most prominent in France and the United States and has been compared to the subgenre of World War I literature (Orban 2009). This literature was mostly centered on the frustrations of the LGBT community, with American writings taking a more political view of the disease and French writers approaching it from a philosophical standpoint.

Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* and William M. Hoffman's *As Is* brought attention to the subgenre in the USA in 1985. Other notable works are Randy Shilts' *And the Band Played On* (1987), a look at AIDS through the lens of investigative journalism that outlines the failures of containing the disease and Paul Monette's more personal *Borrowed Time* (1988) which follows the struggles of living with AIDS. Arguably the most commercially successful work in the AIDS literature sub-genre came in the form of *Angels in America* by Tony Kushner, a play which won both the Pulitzer and Tony prize. (Orban, 2009). It even reached Estonia.

Many examples of AIDS literature have been plays. Indeed, the epidemic created a drama subgenre of AIDS plays, which can be divided into two generations. The first begun in 1984 with *The AIDS Show*, staged in Theatre Rhinoceros in San Francisco, an LGB theatre company. This generation wrote of the struggle that the LGBT community faced, how they were forced to adapt to and live with AIDS. The plays tend to take a removed view of the situation, placing their characters further back in time and commenting on AIDS through metaphors. (Barnes-McLain 1997) Larry Kramer's 1985 *The Normal Heart* is one of the most widely known first generation plays, receiving the Sarah Siddons Award, among others. Kramer himself, a well-known LGBT rights activist is also known as the co-founder of ACT UP. (Orban 2009)

The second generation of plays which took a new viewpoint on the epidemic arrived in the 1990s with Doug Holsclaw's *The Baddest of Boys* in 1992. The grim cataloguing of life with

AIDS was replaced by a humorous tone and although the deaths caused by AIDS were still a theme, the focus shifted to the quality of a person's life and how to make the most of it. The second generation directly refers to politicians, events and times, though coloring them all in a layer of absurdity. (Barnes-McLain 1997) *Angels in America* is a two-part play tackling not only the AIDS epidemic, but also questions of religion and Cold War politics, yet is also an example of the second generation of AIDS plays. Its author, Tony Kushner, received the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1993 for *Angels in America*.

This thesis looks at *The Normal Heart* and *Angels in America*, as examples of two generations of AIDS plays, to analyze how internalized homophobia, spurred into the limelight by the rapidly evolving AIDS epidemic, is represented in the two plays: as a universal gay experience that appears morally ambiguous or as something negative that impedes LGBT progress? In order to answer this question, this thesis will, first, discuss internalized homophobia and how literature has portrayed gay life and also indirectly contributed to the persistence of internalized homophobia. The empirical section will analyze both plays for instances of internalized homophobia and see how they affect the attempts of the characters to cope with the AIDS crisis.

2. Internalized Homophobia

Internalized homophobia has been concisely defined by Mallory O. Johnson, *et al.* (2008) as “the internalization of societal antihomosexual attitudes”. It is important to note that internalized homophobia does not occur only in LGBT individuals but is also prevalent in heterosexuals and cisgender people whose negative views on the LGBT community are a product of their social environment. Internalized homophobia has also been categorized as a part of minority stress unique to the LGBT community. Minority stress is stress an individual experiences through problems unique to belonging to a marginalized minority group. Internalized homophobia is the result of the views and actions of the surrounding society on the LGBT minority group. (Williamson 2000)

2.1. Antihomosexual Actions

Violence and prejudice motivated by hatred towards the LGBT population has always been a major reason why LGBT individuals are afraid of coming out of the closet. The definition of a hate crime did not include the LGBT until 2009 when violence motivated by an individual’s gender, sexual orientation, disability, and gender-identity was added to expand the definition of a hate crime by the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act in the USA (United States Department of Justice, 2019). Sodomy laws were abolished also very recently, with Texas being the last US state to decriminalize homosexuality in 2003 (Legal Information Institute, 2003).

The criminalization of homosexuality before it was abolished motivated widespread discrimination against individuals suspected of homosexuality and numerous police raids on known gay establishments in the 1960s. This would ultimately lead to the Stonewall Riots in

1969, the LGBT uprisings in a push towards rights for sexual minorities in the 1970s. (History, 2017). However, public activism did not put an end to anti-gay violence, as can be seen in the murder of Matthew Shepard in 1998 and homophobic instances of hate crime that have lasted to this day. Thus, it is not surprising that the majority of LGBT people chose to not explicitly speak about or otherwise reveal their sexuality, remaining in the closet due to societal pressure.

2.2. Antihomosexual Attitudes

LGBT folks have long existed in literature, although they have often been stereotyped and stigmatized. Gay men are usually represented as being effeminate, lesbians take on male stereotypes and bisexuals are promiscuous people who cannot make up their mind. Before the 21st century, homosexuality was heavily veiled and only hinted at. For example, the works of Oscar Wilde or Walt Whitman allude to homosexuality (Dickinson 2005). E. M. Foster allowed the publication of his openly gay novel *Maurice* only after his death (Symodson 2016). Even in today's more tolerant world, LGBT representation is bound to tropes that, while not explicitly homophobic, paint a problematic picture of the community.

Laurie Barth Walczak writes in their dissertation on homosexuality and homophobia in young adult literature about the tendency in young adult literature to include a queer side-character in the story for the exploration of homosexuality as a theme, only to have that side character die. This trope of killing off the homosexual character has become known as the “bury your gays” trope in the modern media landscape but has existed in YA writings since the 1970s. (Walczak 2014) This idea had long existed in representations of gay characters in fiction: as Heather Love puts it, “the history of Western representation is littered with the corpses of gender and sexual deviants. Those who are directly identified with same-sex desire

most often end up dead; if they manage to survive, it is on such compromised terms that it makes death seem attractive” (Love 2007: 1). The identification of a character as queer also takes the narrative attention away from them, often leading to unresolved homophobia and mid-completion character arcs while the heterosexual protagonists appear more fleshed out and real (Lefebvre 2005). In a sense, this dehumanizes the queer side characters, keeping them one-dimensional. The presence of the LGBT is acknowledged in today’s young adult novels, but just as quickly removed to the side-lines or killed for shock value, like something unseemly. This repeats the patterns identified by Vito Russo about films already in the 1980s in his *The Celluloid Closet* (1981).

The negative portrayal and stereotyping of LGBT characters in literature and other media does not only perpetuate internalized homophobia but shows the importance of reading texts written by members of the LGBT community about the LGBT community. Authors who have experienced marginalization themselves have a unique perspective on LGBT issues that is not colored by as many stereotypes or negative biases, hence why this work focuses on plays written by gay men retelling the gay experience during the AIDS crisis.

2.3. Internalized Homophobia and AIDS

Philip M. Kayal tackled the issue of internalized homophobia as a fallout of AIDS already in 1985. It is, however, in more recent studies that the correlation between the two has been expanded to show that internalized homophobia was a reason for infection, as it is thought to cause more promiscuous activity and drug use in LGBT people. At this point, it is worth noting that the term ‘heterosexism’ has come to replace ‘homophobia’ in queer studies, but the term ‘homophobia’ will be used in this thesis as ‘heterosexism’ as a term is broader and obscures the specific stigmatization of LGBTQ people.

Johnson, *et al.* take a deeper look at the correlation between internalized homophobia and the spread of HIV. LGB people with higher rates of internalized homophobia frequently fail or refuse to create secure social attachments. Instead, they seek out multiple brief sexual encounters, increasing their risk of contracting HIV. Johnson *et al.* also writes that internalized homophobia can make LGB people view themselves and other LGB as unimportant, leading to fewer precautions during sexual intercourse, such as not using a condom. This negative view of their own sexual orientation can also make them avoid LGBT community spaces, such as LGBT centers, where they would otherwise be able to access information about safe sex and HIV prevention.

Another correlation looked at in the study is between internalized homophobia and substance abuse. The LGB population has a high rate of substance use. Though the findings are yet inconclusive, Johnson *et al.* cite studies which have shown that men use drugs in order to cope with negative emotions. Stimulant use has also been tied to heightened sexual behavior.

Internalized homophobia is also a source of depression, which can be a barrier between successful HIV treatment. Non-adherence to HIV treatment can be a result of both depression and drug use, both of which are linked to internalized homophobia. (Johnson, *et al.* 2008: 833) Depression as a cause for non-adherence to HIV treatment becomes even more problematic once the minority status of the LGBT community is taken under consideration.

Despite same-sex marriage being legalized in the USA, LGBT people still face discrimination, as a study by the Center for American Progress in 2020 that interviewed 1,528 LGBT adults, shows. More than 1 in 3 LGBT Americans faced discrimination and 1 in 2 reported a negative psychological impact as a cause. More than half of them are closeted fearing this very same discrimination. (Gruberg *et al.* 2020) Feeling the need to remain in the

closet due to the threat of violence and discrimination has a negative impact on the mental health of LGBT individuals, thus lowering their adherence to HIV treatment.

Internalized homophobia presents us with the fact that the LGBT community has not been normalized, despite the efforts of the Western world to move towards a more inclusive society. AS long as the LGBT are viewed as the “other” in society, internalized homophobia will continue to exist that will affect the community negatively both mentally and physically. The depiction of the LGBT struggles and viewpoint in literature is an attempt for the community to show themselves as fellow humans, not “others” in a cisgender and heterosexual society. Therefore, it is important to look at LGBT literature and unravel the meanings and contexts therein to ultimately understand and show that these are the struggles and experiences of fellow humans that should not be pushed aside.

3. Empirical Analysis: Internalized Homophobia in Two Generations of AIDS Plays

3.1. The Normal Heart

The Normal Heart was written by Larry Kramer in 1985 and premiered in The Public Theatre in New York City. The play made it to Broadway in 2011. In this example of the first generation of AIDS plays, Kramer tells us the story of Ned Weeks, a writer who has become concerned with the rapid development of the AIDS epidemic and the lack of attention being paid to the new disease. Weeks, believing in activism and taking to heart the words of Dr Brookner who warns about the severity of the epidemic, puts together a vocal advocacy group. While attempting to get support for his cause, Ned also meets Felix Turner, a journalist, who he falls in love with throughout the play.

Ned believes in radical and aggressive action, something not mirrored by the community around him, who elect Bruce Niles to lead the advocacy group. Bruce, as it turns out, wishes to solve the matter through slow and delicate negotiations with the rest of the volunteers agreeing with him. The people wishing to fight the death sowed by AIDS are afraid of drawing any attention to themselves, decrying Ned's willingness to use aggressive tactics.

The play has a tragic end when Ned is expelled from his own advocacy group for being too vocal. During this time, Felix, who Ned has started a relationship with, contracts AIDS and becomes very sick. The play ends with Ned visiting Felix on his deathbed where the two are joined in marriage by Dr. Brookner, giving the audience a bittersweet ending.

The most prominent example of internalized homophobia in *The Normal Heart* is in the AIDS activists' complacency with the status quo that they had before the crisis. While Ned

wishes to begin fighting injustice and calling out how terribly mishandled the whole situation is and how hypocritically the system is acting towards the gay community, the rest of his companions disagree with his brash actions and only wish to gain some funding and spread awareness about the virus. Unlike Ned, they disagree with the method of attacking and pressuring politicians due to the backlash that it might cause for their own lives. Bruce Niles, president of the AIDS organization says the following about Ned: “I worry about Ned. I mean, I like him a lot, but his style is so... confrontational. We could get into a lot of trouble with that. (Kramer 2011: 31). “

After Ned wrote an article attacking the New York City’s mayor’s closeted assistant for refusing them help, denying the epidemic, and threatening one of the members of the AIDS organization with the loss of his government job, Ned’s coworker Mickey decries his vocal outbursts with the following passage: “You keep trying to make us say things that we don’t want to say! And I don’t think we can afford to make so many enemies before we have enough friends” (Kramer 2011: 59). There are many characters who take very little interest in standing up for their own rights, but they are all connected by a common fear: the fear of being outed. Seeing how terribly society around them treats gay people, especially during the demonized AIDS crisis, they do not wish to be connected to a gay rights organization by name, thus running the risk of being recognized as part of the marginalized group. One of these examples is the organization’s very own president, who comments that: “My boss doesn’t know and he hates gays. He keeps telling me fag jokes and I keep laughing at them.” (Kramer 2011: 32).

Here Bruce shows willingness to go along with homophobia in the name of preserving his job and status, instead of standing up for his and, by extension, the rights of all gay people. The homophobia directed at him becomes internalized as he brings this attitude over to the organization which he agrees to become the president of, but if the president of such an

organization is in the closet, then so is, by extension the entire organization. They run into this problem when they are attempting to mail their newsletters, but are stopped by the post office, saying that in order to get tax exemption, they must use their full name on their mail, rather than just initials:

GRADY: Harry went to the post office with the fifty-seven cartons of our new newsletters

[...]

BRUCE (*to* TOMMY): The post office won't accept them because we just used our initials.

[...]

BRUCE: In order to get tax-exemption we have to use our full name.

(Kramer 2011: 57)

Thus, it can clearly be seen how a closeted organization can be impeded by its own internalization of homophobia just as much as any homophobic outside influences.

This creates a vicious circle: the persecution of LGBT folks increases due to the lack of rights and laws protecting them, which scares the LGBT folks away from fighting for these rights and laws. People such as Bruce Niles and Hiram Keebler – of whom I will talk about in more detail further on – who are afraid of the impact of their own sexuality on their lives, having internalized the homophobia of the society around them, are continuously critiqued as roadblocks in the fight against AIDS. This critique of people in power who refuse to come out and use their example and influence for the betterment of the LGBT community reflects the views of the author, Larry Kramer, who believed in outing gay men in places of power to force them to make contributions towards the community through their platform (Krier 1990).

These powerful, but closeted gay men present a challenge to Ned Weeks at almost every turn of his fight. His first stumbling block is his attempt to get the story about AIDS out in *The New York Times*. He first meets his future lover, Felix Turner, after a fruitless search for someone to run an AIDS story in the *Times*. In this scene, Ned speaks of how many people he has already turned to, all of whom refused to write anything on the topic of AIDS. “NED: No one here wants to write another article. I’ve talked to half a dozen reporters and editors and the guy who wrote the first piece.” (Kramer, 2011: 15).

As Ned’s and Felix’s relationship continues, Felix attempts to speak to a reporter of the *Times*, only to more be shut down, and this time specifically due to a fear of being found out as homosexual:

FELIX: I did speak to one of our science reporters today.

NED: (delighted) Felix! What did he say?

FELIX: He’s gay too, and afraid they’ll find out. [...] (Kramer, 2011: 40)

Another instance of this appears when Ned’s organization tries to get an appointment with the mayor of New York City, only to be stopped by his assistant, Hiram Keebler. Hiram admits to being gay by a slip of a tongue: “HIRAM: Okay – there are half a million gay men in our area. Five hundred and nine cases doesn’t seem so high, considering how many of u s— I mean, of you! – there are.” (Kramer 2011: 51). Despite his own sexuality, Hiram refuses to help Ned’s organization to see the mayor and even denies that there is an epidemic going on at all. Ironically, he comments on how he cannot take the situation seriously, since apparently only Ned is being outspoken about AIDS activism: “HIRAM: If so many of you are so upset about what’s happening, why do I only hear from his loudmouth [Ned]?” (Kramer 2011: 51).

Dr. Emma Brookner also reveals to the audience at the end of the play that the panel of doctors that are assessing her work on AIDS and whether it merits funding was compiled

by: “[...] a closeted homosexual who is doing everything in his power to sweep this under the rug [...] (Kramer 2011: 66)”.

Bruce, the elected president of the AIDS organization founded by Ned also fits into this category of gay men silencing themselves out of fear. He states: “I just think we have to stay out of anything political (Kramer 2011: 32)” despite rallying for a cause that is ultimately impeded by politicians who refuse to take action in the face of the outbreak.

Taken together, these characters represent the antagonistic forces of the play as they oppose not only the further funding of AIDS research, but also any acknowledgement of the disease even being an issue. They have internalized the rhetoric of not being equal to straight people and do not wish to break the status quo where they are left relatively untouched due to their closeted status. Due to internalized homophobia, they fear the fight for equal rights and what it would mean for them if they were outed, so they keep themselves away from the AIDS movement.

3.2 Angels in America

Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes was written by Tony Kushner in 1991. It consists of two parts, *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika*. The play has won many awards and follows a longer and more complicated plot than *The Normal Heart*, tackling themes alongside the AIDS epidemic such as Judaism, Mormon migration, and figures such as Roy Cohn and Ethel Rosenberg.

This analysis will focus heavily on the characters of Roy Cohn and Joseph Porter Pitt (Joe). The former contracts HIV during the play, but forces his doctor to be quiet about it, insisting that he has cancer instead, not wanting to be tied to the ‘gay plague’, as it would

mark him as a homosexual. Cohn views his death as a race against time, as he wishes to die a lawyer, but a board of his superiors have begun to consider his disbarment due to his questionable law practices. This is a race he loses; Cohn dies knowing that he had been disbarred.

Joe also struggles with his identity as a gay man throughout the play. He leaves his wife, Harper, for Louis, a man he meets at work and who has just left his partner, Prior, due to the latter being diagnosed with AIDS. Despite their differing views on politics, the two fall into a relationship, only for it to fall apart when Prior tells Louis that Joe is working for Roy Cohn. Louis digs up the cases that Joe has worked on, demanding answers on how he could be so inhumane. Their confrontation results in a fight, after which Joe leaves and Louis wants nothing to do with him.

While both characters struggle with internalized homophobia, Joe's is motivated mostly by religion and he tries to repress his homosexuality through marriage, while Cohn has no reservations against having male on male intercourse but abhors the label and social downfall that would follow, should anyone learn of his sexual tendencies. Joe recognizes his identity while disliking who he is, while Cohn simply refuses to publicly acknowledge his, it having no negative effect on his own perception of himself (that can be seen from the play). Indeed, internalized homophobia surfaces differently in different kinds of people; something that can be gauged from *Angels in America* far better than from *The Normal Heart*.

Joe must come face to face with his buried sexual orientation when his wife, Harper, upon hearing that he might be homosexual, confronts him:

HARPER: [...] I hate it Joe, tell me, say it...

JOE: All I will say is that I am a very good man who has worked very hard to become good and you want to destroy that. You want to destroy me, but I am not going to let you do that.
(Kushner 2007: 46)

From his response to Harper, it can be seen that Joe thinks of homosexuality as something evil, something he has had to repress in himself to become a good man. Harper attempting to dig this secret up is akin to destroying this progress that he thinks he has made with trying to convert himself away from homosexuality. Joe blames himself and believes that there is something wrong with him and his attraction towards men, but he does not deny that being gay is a part of him, albeit one he has tried desperately to suppress. This is clearly contrasted in Roy Cohn's parallel scene, where Cohn is forced to face his own homosexuality while in the office of his doctor, Henry, being diagnosed with AIDS:

ROY: This disease [...] It afflicts mostly homosexuals and drug addicts.
HENRY: Mostly. Hemophiliacs are also at risk.
ROY: Homosexuals and drug addicts. So why are you implying that I... (*pause*) What are you implying, Henry?
(Kushner 2007: 49)

Like Joe, Cohn refuses to say anything outright and requires an outsider to pressure him into accepting that he is homosexual, and in Cohn's case also that he has contracted AIDS. However, unlike Joe, Cohn is heavy in denial and refuses to take onto himself the term of gay or homosexual, as he refuses to liken himself to who he sees as a weak minority group on the bottom of the social pecking order.

ROY: No. Like all labels they tell you one thing and one thing only: where does an individual so identified fit in the food chain, in the pecking order? Not ideology, or sexual taste, but something much simpler: clout. Not who I fuck or who fucks me, but who will pick up the phone when I call, who owes me favors. This is what a label

refers to. Now to someone who does not understand this, homosexual is what I am because I have sex with men. But really this is wrong. Homosexuals are not men who sleep with other men. Homosexual are men who in fifteen years of trying cannot get a pissant antidiscrimination bill through City Council. Homosexuals are men who know nobody and who nobody knows. Who have zero clout. Does this sound like me, Henry? (Kushner 2007: 51)

For Cohn, the label of gay is one that puts him in the same position as the other homosexuals, for he views them as something below his own status due to them being “nobodies”. He wishes to distance himself from the labels and thus be immune to the plights of the LGBT community. That is, until AIDS comes knocking; a harsh reminder that no matter how much you distance yourself from who you are, the issues and plague your community will catch up to you, because you have not stood up for the weakest links and thought yourself above them. Henry is forced to put Cohn in front of the facts after he insists that he has liver cancer and not AIDS:

HENRY: Well, whatever the fuck you have, Roy, it’s very serious, and I haven’t got a damn thing for you. The NIH in Bethesda has a new drug called AZT with a two-year waiting list that not even I can get you onto. So get on the phone, Roy, and dial the fifteen numbers, and tell the First Lady that you need in on an experimental treatment for liver cancer, because you can call it any damn thing you want, Roy, but what it boils down to is very bad news. (Kushner 2007: 52)

However, this does not mean that any of Cohn’s views are overturned – instead of using his influence to draw attention to the AIDS epidemic, Cohn gets himself a lifetime supply of AZT, an experimental drug for AIDS that the entire homosexual population needs, but which is unattainable unless you are as well-connected as Roy Cohn. Obtaining the AZT is Cohn’s last show of power, his final attempt to denounce from himself the homosexual label. His nurse, Belize, says: “BELIZE: Even if you live fifty more years you won’t swallow all these pills” (Kushner 2007: 189)., Cohn is aware that the pressure to disbar him is mounting

while his own health is declining, lessening the chances of him standing up for himself. If he truly intends to die a lawyer, prolonging his life with an experimental drug while his disbarment is just a matter of time seems an odd choice. But the shelves of AZT that line the wall of Cohn's hospital room are not a last plea for his own life – they are a symbol of power, something that the lowly homosexual would never be able to get his hands on to. Holding onto this medication, depriving the rest of the needy from it is Cohn's last stand against the homosexuality label that the AIDS epidemic has forced upon him. Yet even this final struggle is futile, as his nurse Belize and Louis break into Cohn's hospital room after his death and steal the AZT in order to give it to their AIDS afflicted friend, Prior. Roy Cohn's final defiance is futile as he dies of AIDS, his AZT given to a homosexual who nobody knows and who knows nobody.

Returning to Joe, it is clear that the internalized homophobia displayed in his character differs greatly from Cohn's. On several occasions, it is his God and religion that make him feel guilty for his sexual orientation but despise this he accepts the label of homosexual readily. In this way, Joe is the opposite of Roy Cohn's character who protested the label but not the act. Unlike Cohn and much like the characters of *The Normal Heart*, Joe is afraid of being gay in the intolerant society surrounding him:

JOE: You just... Whatever you feel like saying or doing, you don't care, you just... do it.

LOUIS: Do what?

JOE: It. Whatever it is you want to do.

[...]

JOE: Yes, I mean it must be scary, you...

LOUIS: (*shrugs*) Land of the free. Home of the brave. Call me irresponsible.

JOE: It's kind of terrifying. (Kushner 2007: 78)

Joe finds Louis' open admission to being a liberal homosexual to be terrifying, like being openly taboo. Through this, it is clear that he sees his own sexuality as taboo as well, not only in the eyes of his religion, but also in the eyes of the society surrounding him. Still, as this fear of being open towards society is not brought up again, it is his religion that applies the most pressure on Joe:

(To Louis)
 JOE: I'm going to hell for doing this. (Kushner 2007: 122)
 and
 (To Louis)
 JOE: I know how you feel, I keep expecting divine retribution for this, but... (Kushner 2007: 203)

During his relationship with Louis, the thought of divine punishment seems to echo in Joe's mind. Homosexuality is a sin that makes him a bad person in the eyes of God; something that Joe had spent most of his life trying to suppress, hide and undo. He says as much to Harper:

JOE: Forget about that. Just listen. You want the trust. This is the truth. I knew this when I married you. I've known this I guess for as long as I've known anything, but... I don't know, I thought maybe that with enough effort and will I could change myself... but I can't... (Kushner 2007: 83)

The same attitude can be seen in the comment already quoted above: "JOE: All I will say is that I am a very good man who has worked very hard to become good and you want to destroy that. You want to destroy me, but I am not going to let you do that."
 (Kushner 2007: 46)

Despite having accepted his homosexuality, Joe still views it and, by extension, himself, as something inherently sinful and opposite of good. Kushner challenges this view in a scene between Louis and Joe, where Louis has found the court records of various immoral rulings Joe and Cohn have managed to pass.

LOUIS: I love the one where you found against those women on Staten Island who were suing the New Jersey factory, the toothpaste makers whose orange-colored smoke was *blinding children*...

JOE: Not blind, just minor irritation.

LOUIS: Three of them has to be *hospitalized. Joe*. It's sort of brilliant, in a satanic sort of way, how you conclude that these women have no right to sue under the Air and Water Protection Act because the Air and Water Protection act doesn't protect *people*, but actually only *air and water*! Amazing! (Kushner 2007: 240-241)

Throwing the word *satanic* into his speech, Louis clearly marks these acts as something immoral, ungodly. When he, some dialogue later, throws the case files in Joe's face, it is as if he's saying, "your homosexuality is the least of your sins".

In a way, both Joe and Cohn's opinions of their homosexuality are refuted in the play; Cohn cannot save himself from the gay plague despite his influence and money that should have set him apart from the common marginalized homosexual with no clout, and Joe is made to face the fact that, homosexuality or not, he was never a good person.

3.3. Comparison

The Normal Heart and *Angels in America* deal with very different aspects of internalized homophobia. *The Normal Heart* heavily focuses on the fear of discrimination from the surrounding society, the loss of a career and a life as an aftermath of coming out of

the closet. This fear is mentioned once in *Angels in America* in relation to Joe's character, but is not a prominent part of the play, as it is in *The Normal Heart*. Instead, *Angels'* characters are afraid of being associated with the powerless 'nobodies' of the LGBT community and the wrath of God.

Both characters in the throes of internalized homophobia and the conflicts stemming from it are much more fleshed out in *Angels in America*, due to second generation plays focusing on real people and politicians, such as Roy Cohn. In comparison, the conflicts of internalized homophobia in *The Normal Heart* seemed nebulous, as almost always the gay character who made anti-gay decisions did so off-stage and was never confronted, unlike Joe and Cohn. It must be noted that it is in *The Normal Heart* that internalized homophobia is portrayed as actively impeding efforts to alleviate the AIDS crisis on a larger level. Hiram and Bruce are actively going against Ned Weeks and his attempts to get everyone to listen and declare a health emergency, while Roy Cohn's biggest misstep against AIDS is hoarding AZT. Cohn hoarding of AZT does not have an impact on the drug's distribution as the trials were dragged out. Internalized Homophobia in *The Normal Heart* affects the entire AIDS cause portrayed in the play, while in *Angels in America* it is portrayed as affecting an individual's view of himself, and less time is spent portraying how those attitudes can affect the LGBT community at large, possibly because by that time the severity of AIDS had been acknowledged.

However, the common denominator between characters dealing with internalized homophobia in both plays is that they are all cast as the villains of the story. A closeted mayor and medical professionals cover up the severity of AIDS in *The Normal Heart* as not to draw

attention to themselves, while Roy Cohn hoards valuable AZT as a symbol of power, not feeling guilt for the gay people dying due to the lack of a cure.

While good examples of what society's heteronormative pressure can make gay people feel, it is important to note the problematics of these characters being villainized. Internalized homophobia does not mark a person as inherently anti-LGBT, and the fault of feeling negatively towards their sexuality has to be laid on their heteronormative surroundings and not the person themselves. Interestingly enough, this attitude of "if you're not with us, you're against us" can also be a form of internalized homophobia, here portrayed by the authors who lay the blame on the inaction of fellow gay people, rather than the heteronormative society that makes them scared of action. That being said, the oppression of their surroundings will also not be solved through inaction, creating a vicious circle of sorts. This is a discussion that could go on forever, so I will leave it with a quote from a stranger from the vast annals of social media: "The greatest ruse the Republicans pulled was making us believe that other queer people are the enemy".

Conclusion

Historically, the LGBT population has been marginalized by the heteronormative society surrounding them, be in law or in media portrayal. When the AIDS epidemic brought with it an unprecedented mortality rate among gay men, medical institutions, scientific institutions, and government officials first denied that a disease was sweeping America, and when the death tolls became undeniable, allocated only the minimal funding into its research and prevention. Today, AIDS is still treated as a disease of marginalized groups, but it is also true that not only LGBT people are in danger: rates of infection through needle injection and sex work are increasing, and it must be noted that modern medicine does not have a cure for the HIV virus, only ways to make living with it more comfortable.

The continuing spread of AIDS inside the LGBT population and internalized homophobia may have some correlations. Gay men who feel ashamed of their sexuality are not as likely to seek out AIDS prevention resources and are more likely to engage in dangerous intercourse. In addition, depression, which is often caused by internalization of homophobia, has a negative effect on modern AIDS treatments, making them less effective.

Internalized homophobia itself is caused by antihomosexual attitudes displayed by the society surrounding a queer individual. Discrimination laws against different sexual orientations were passed only fairly recently in the United States, and even that does not mean that homophobia has been eradicated. It is rampant both in violence displayed against the LGBT community as well as in media, where LGBT representation – if, indeed, there is any – is often highly problematic. In the past, queer topics were written about through layers of metaphors, and even now, where characters can be openly LGBT, they often are treated as too

unimportant to fully flesh out as a backdrop of the heterosexual protagonists and much more often killed for shock-value, making it seem like queer lives are indeed expendable.

This has made it important to study the LGBT community's portrayal of themselves by bringing queer writers, playwrights, directors, and other creators into the spotlight for the reading of an unfiltered queer experience. This very same queer gaze is what is needed to analyze the AIDS epidemic – an event that looks very different from the perspective of a gay man than it does from any heterosexual narrative.

The analysis of two AIDS plays, *The Normal Heart* and *Angels in America*, showed that internalized homophobia is interpreted as an impediment of LGBT and AIDS progress and painted as something that only the villainous gay people who fail to contribute to the progress of LGBT rights experience. Whether intentional or not, this sort of portrayal can bring, and in a lot of cases has brought, animosity into the LGBT community, causing infighting, rather than a united cause. The first generation play *The Normal Heart* paints the picture of the closeted gay man as the enemy, while the second generation *Angels in America* portrays internalized homophobia as harmful to the gay man it afflicts, which is closer to a more realistic portrayal of internalized homophobia as something caused by a heteronormative society and that can afflict every LGBT person.

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RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Moonika Illisson

Internalized Homophobia in AIDS plays: an analysis of Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* / Internaliseeritud homofobia AIDSi näidendites: Larry Kramer'i „*The Normal Heart*“ ja Tony Kushneri „*Angels in America*“ analüüs

Bakalaureusetöö

2021

[lk arv]

Annotatsioon: Bakalaureusetöö eesmärgiks on analüüsida ja võrrelda internaliseeritud homofobia avaldumist kahes erineva generatsiooni AIDSi näidendis, et teada saada, kas internaliseeritud homofobia avaldub, kui universaalne LGBT kogemus või kui midagi negatiivset, mis pärsib LGBT kogukonda. Analüüsitavad näidendid on Larry Kramer'i "The Normal Heart" ja Tony Kushneri "Angels in America". Töö teoreetiline osa kirjeldab AIDSi epideemiat Ühendriikides 70datel ja 80datel, internaliseeritud homofobia tagamaid ja AIDSi ja internaliseeritud homofobia vahekorda. Samuti kirjeldab autor LGBT kogukonna tagakiusamist ja negatiivset representatsiooni meedias, kirjandusest filmideni ja internaliseeritud homofobia mõju AIDSi levikule LGBT kogukonnas.

Empiiriline analüüs kirjeldab internaliseeritud homofobia avaldumist kahes näidendis, kusjuures mõlemas näidendis avaldub internaliseeritud homofobia kui negatiivne tegur, mis on omane negatiivsetele tegelastele, kes vastanduvad peategelastele. See on eriti tugevalt näha esimese generatsiooni näidendis "the Normal Heart", kus internaliseeritud homofobia takistab peategelasel tegelemast tõsise AIDSi aktivismiga. Teise generatsiooni näidendis "Angels in America" mõjutab internaliseeritud homofobia rohkem inimest ennast kui LGBT kogukonda üldiselt, kuid siiski on ta seotud negatiivsete tegelastega.

Märksõnad: Ameerika kirjandus, AIDS, LGBT, internaliseeritud homofobia

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