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### Abstract

AIDS fiction has been researched extensively but not a lot of attention has been paid to how this genre could have served as a tool for homosexual authors during the AIDS crisis to push back and negate the dominant cultural narratives surrounding the homosexual community and the AIDS crisis. By analysing three works from openly homosexual authors that were written during the early years of the AIDS epidemic, *Borrowed Time*, *Angels in America*, and *The Normal Heart*, it becomes clear that these authors used their platform as a way to shift the narrative of the time into one that put the blame for the epidemic not on the community itself, but on the government that was failing them. By discussing the culture of promiscuity in an honest way, addressing internalized stigmas, and highlighting the heroic actions of the queer community and activists, these texts shed light on the queer side of the AIDS narrative, which was not shared on a broad public scale at the time.

*Key terms: narrative power, community formation, conservatism, queer activism, internalized stigma, community support*

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## Introduction

“Everywhere in the world, people have to confront dominant, hegemonic worlds: they have to deal with institutional, media, locational, and everyday power.”<sup>1</sup> The sociologist Ken Plummer looked at narratives as they exist within stories as well as in society at large, and he concluded that human lives are full of interactions with different power dynamics. The impact a particular narrative can have on society at large might be hard to imagine in today’s day and age, where everything is available on the internet and where mainstream media is no longer the primary source of information for most people, but one only has to look at countries with heavy censorship laws to see the impact a specific and persistent narrative can have. Plummer starts his book *Narrative Power: The Struggle for Human Value* by writing about how “the counter-stories of social movements changed [his] life.”<sup>2</sup> Plummer, who identifies as gay, writes about growing up with narratives that told him his sexuality was a problem and that he was doomed to live an unhappy and tragic life, and the impact these narratives had on his own perception of life. Plummer goes on to write about how the gay rights movement of the 1960s and its stories of positivity and societal change enabled him to embrace his sexuality and develop a different perspective about his future. Plummer’s story is not a unique one. Queer people of all generations have encountered narratives, in fiction as well as in society, that speak negatively of our existence. This is especially true for the generation that lived through the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s, which might be the biggest showcase of institutional and social homophobia in modern history.

While there has been a lot of research into different elements of AIDS fiction, there seems to be a gap in the research when it comes to how gay authors used their works as a counterweight to the dominant cultural narratives surrounding the AIDS crisis. This led to me

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<sup>1</sup> Ken Plummer, *Narrative Power: The Struggle for Human Value* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 73.

<sup>2</sup> Plummer, *Narrative Power*, ix.

asking the question: how does AIDS fiction written by homosexual authors during the AIDS epidemic engage with Plummer's concept of narrative power? By analysing which dominant narratives are being brought to the forefront and how these are undermined, I hope to find an answer to this question. I expect that works such as *Borrowed Time* provide a counter narrative to the dominant narrative by highlight the human suffering of the AIDS crisis, not only through the account of losing a loved to the disease, but by showcasing inequality and the infrastructure of locational and everyday power.

### Status Quaestionis

In recent years, a small group of cultural critics, spearheaded by eminent scholars like Judith Halberstam and Scott Herring, has embarked on a transformative journey in reevaluating the “the “metronormativity” of queer politics, representation, and criticism.”<sup>3</sup> Their pioneering scholarship reexamines and challenging prevailing assumptions about the centrality of urban settings in shaping queer identities and lifestyles.

In the wake of the AIDS epidemic, the study of AIDS writing emerged as an avenue for exploring the relationship between illness and identity, as noted by Houser, who describes the study of AIDS writing as being “centred on how individuals and group identities dissolve or consolidate around sickness.”<sup>4</sup> This often happened in cities, which were traditionally deemed a privileged setting for members of the queer community when compared to a nonurban environment.<sup>5</sup> While the works I will analyse take place in the city, they do not present it as a place of privilege as they highlight that even in this environment where gay communities can come together, there is a lot of inequality. While the main characters of the primary texts for this research are all in an economically privileged position, it is important to note that the history of AIDS and queer activism has been marked by poverty. To this day, most people who die of AIDS in the U.S. are poor, and “if you read the ACT UP Oral History, over and over again, people of colour, and low-income ACT UP members report dedicating their entire waking lives to the movement.”<sup>6</sup> Paradoxically, despite the city's aura of privilege, the most fervent activists are frequently individuals devoid of societal advantages.

AIDS literature is a topic that has been written about by many, most notably Monica B. Pearl, an expert on twentieth-century American literature. Her recent research has looked

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<sup>3</sup> Heather Houser, *Ecosickness in Contemporary U.S. Fiction: Environment and Affect* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 33.

<sup>4</sup> Houser, *Ecosickness*, 39.

<sup>5</sup> Houser, *Ecosickness*, 39.

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Schulman, *Let The Record Show* (New York: Picador, 2021), xxiii.

at representations of AIDS in late-twentieth-century American culture, with a focus on the formation and development of identity through narratives and how AIDS literature relates to grief. Pearl has published a number of articles about AIDS literature and in 2013 she published a book with Routledge titled *AIDS Literature and Gay Identity: The Literature of Loss*, one of the most extensive texts on AIDS literature and a source for many who write about late-twentieth century AIDS literature. Pearl distinguishes between gay AIDS literature and queer AIDS literature<sup>7</sup> and highlights the main differences between these two genres in both style and function. Gay AIDS literature is characterised as being literature of mourning that is realist and conventional in style and shows a singular subjectivity<sup>8</sup>. Queer AIDS literature is described as literature of melancholia with a narrative style that exposes anxieties over morality and writing. Queer AIDS literature takes part in the discourse around sexual identity and is characterised by a postmodern hybridity<sup>9</sup>.

What Pearl and others who write about AIDS literature do not seem to discuss is how AIDS literature was used by the gay community of the 1980s and 1990s to provide a counter-narrative to the dominant AIDS narratives of the time. Ken Plummer describes different form of narrative, one of which is the counter-narrative: a narrative that does not accept the dominant story and goes against this<sup>10</sup>. Plummer draws a connection between counter-narratives and the AIDS ACT UP movement in the 1980s<sup>11</sup>. Molly Andrews wrote about counter-narratives in a 2002 issue of *Narrative Inquiry*. The ideas proposed in this paper were later expanded upon in the 2004 book *Considering Counter Narratives*, a collaboration between Andrews and Michael Bamberg. This book covers different perspectives on counter-

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<sup>7</sup> Monica B. Pearl, *AIDS Literature and Gay Identity: The Literature of Loss* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 19-21.

<sup>8</sup> Pearl, *AIDS Literature and Gay Identity*, 20.

<sup>9</sup> Pearl, *AIDS Literature and Gay Identity*, 20.

<sup>10</sup> Plummer, *Narrative Power*, 76.

<sup>11</sup> Plummer, *Narrative Power*, 78.

narratives and includes Andrews's original article, six responses to this article, and additional chapters to further the dialogue. Andrews gives definitions and examples of counter-narratives and through the subsequent articles there is a thorough examination of these concepts.

The media coverage of the AIDS crisis has long been a topic of research. Brodie et al. studied the rise and subsequent decline of media coverage<sup>12</sup> and Dorothy Nelkin writes about how the media did not initially cover the AIDS epidemic as a result of editorial resistance to the topic<sup>13</sup>. Randy Shilts and Simon Garfield have written extensively about the response to the AIDS crisis and the (lack of) actions undertaken by the political powers of the time. Shilts's *And the Band Played On: Politics, People and the AIDS Epidemic* is regarded as one of the most important books about the AIDS crisis. Written in 1987, the book chronicles the discovery and spread of the AIDS virus and, more importantly, how medical and political authorities failed to react appropriately to the epidemic. Shilts discusses the impact the AIDS crisis had on the gay community in America as well as American society through extensive investigative journalism and his work is often called a must-read for those interested in the topic. The British equivalent to Shilts's work is Simon Garfield's *The End Of Innocence: Britain in the Time of AIDS*, which documents the development of the AIDS crisis in Britain. Through interviews and investigative journalism, Garfield discusses the political and social response to the crisis and the impact on the gay community in Britain. Both authors are critical of the political response to the epidemic and point to the fact that the vast majority of those affected being homosexual men as the reason for the lack care that was initially given to the epidemic by both politicians and the media.

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<sup>12</sup> Mollyann Brodie et al., "AIDS at 21: Media Coverage of the HIV Epidemic 1981-2002," *Columbia Journalism Review* 42, no. 6 (April 2004): 1-8.

<sup>13</sup> Dorothy Nelkin, "AIDS and the News Media," *The Millbank Quarterly* 69, no. 2 (1991): 297. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3350206>



Lisa Frieden's dissertation “examine[s] the narrative strategies by which the significant AIDS novels . . . both address and resist the apocalyptic significations of time that dominated the rhetoric of AIDS in the first decade of the epidemic in the United States.”<sup>14</sup> The first decade of the AIDS epidemic in the United States was defined by a rhetoric heavily laden with apocalyptic undertones. This context adds an interesting layer to Kushner’s play, in which the looming threat of an apocalypse is presented. Kushner does not ultimately show this apocalypse, deciding to end his play with a message of hope. In doing so his play, which is partially named after the new millennium approaching, seems to distance itself from the earlier decades of AIDS fiction and it gives readers the impression that moving forward, AIDS fiction will focus more on hope and community and less on death and the apocalyptic feelings the epidemic brought about. This aligns with a literary tradition observed by Jeffrey Meyers that “related physical disease and artistic production, one that asserts that “The creation of literature is one way of transcending morality and celebrating human existence, despite the threat of death.”<sup>15</sup>

AIDS fiction and the analysis thereof occupied a new space in the literary field during the early years of this genre’s emergence, as is noted by Frieden: “though much has been written about the relationship between mental illness and literary productions, little had been written about the relationship between physical disease and literature.”<sup>16</sup>

Shifting gears to the sphere of gay drama, John M. Clum identifies three central urges that have shaped the evolution of gay drama. He notes the “‘historical impulse’ – dramatizing that history of oppression and resistance and heroic making,” “‘the anarchic impulse’ – to ridicule straight society and its institutions,” and “‘the domestic impulse’ –

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<sup>14</sup> Lisa Frieden, *Telling Time: resisting the apocalypse in American AIDS Novels* (2020), 3.

<sup>15</sup> Frieden, *Telling Time*, 4.

<sup>16</sup> Frieden, *Telling Time*, 4.

which calls for assimilation through domestication.”<sup>17</sup> The historical impulse is visible in Kramer and Monette’s work, in which the history of the gay community is mentioned numerous times in a reverent, almost legendary manner.

Within the intricate tapestry of AIDS writing, Eisner introduces the concept of melodrama, which “is a conversative generic style which uses sensational incident and violent appeals to emotion to get its point across”<sup>18</sup> Eisner's framework provides a fresh lens to scrutinize how AIDS narratives manipulate emotions and sensational incidents to convey the severity of the epidemic's impact.

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<sup>17</sup> John M. Clum, “Dramatizing Gay Male History,” *Theatre Journal* 41, no. 2 (May 1989): 170.

<sup>18</sup> Douglas Eisner, “Liberating Narrative: AIDS and the Limits of Melodrama in Monette and Weir,” *College Literature* 24, no. 1 (February 1997): 214. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3207857>

## Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework at the heart of this thesis is Ken Plummer's concept of narrative power. Plummer described narrative power as something that is "produced ubiquitously in everyday living [that] sensitizes us to the ways in which lives are asymmetrical and can be dominated, shaped and influenced (sometimes damaged and exploited) by stories; how, in turn, people resist and sometimes empower themselves through new stories."<sup>19</sup> When engaging with the framework created by Plummer, it is important to keep in mind that the narratives Plummer refers to are not synonymous with narratives as they exist within stories.

When Plummer uses the term narratives he is referring to narratives as they exist within society, which can be engaged with and be represented through literature but they are not limited to it. Plummer describes this distinction as follows: "stories, the *what* we tell, put characters into plots, with beginnings, middles and ends: they set scenes, create tensions and find resolutions . . . Narratives, the *how* we do this, examine the acts, apparatus, mechanics and structures that make it all work: just *how* we tell tales, present news reports, make films, send tweets, tell our stories."<sup>20</sup> The creation of narratives is thus not limited to those who create fiction. In fact, narratives "cannot have a life unless brought into being by human actions."<sup>21</sup> What people do with stories, how they act in response to a narrative, is what matters in terms of narrative power, and this human agency in relation to narratives is what Plummer calls narrative action.

Narrative power is created through and intimately connected with "social institutions, communications, social location, and everyday life."<sup>22</sup> *Institutions* refers to "the big things, such as the state, violence, the economy or culture, and religion."<sup>23</sup> Plummer uses

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<sup>19</sup> Plummer, *Narrative Power*, 30-31.

<sup>20</sup> Plummer, *Narrative Power*, 5.

<sup>21</sup> Plummer, *Narrative Power*, 24.

<sup>22</sup> Plummer, *Narrative Power*, 31.

<sup>23</sup> Plummer, *Narrative Power*, 32.

*communications* to refer to “media and digital . . . stories are generated through the power of media and digital worlds, contain powerful messages, and then in turn exert enormous power over our lives.”<sup>24</sup> Social *locations* encompasses a broad category that ranges “from our economic standing, gender, ethnicity, age, religion and sexuality, to our health, community, nation, and on to our wider links with the environment.”<sup>25</sup> Plummer states that all of these elements have an impact on the relationship between humans and power and that they therefore will be present in stories told by humans. The *everyday* is used to refer to “the stories that arise through the power of the social situation of everyday life . . . Ultimately, all power rises up from everyday life: it is what makes power happen throughout history.”<sup>26</sup> There are many different ways in which narratives of power can manifest, ranging from physical violence such as torture and public executions, to invisible forms of violence such as the persistent and damaging degradation. Plummer writes about the symbolic violence that is done over time that leads to “a kind of worldwide subterranean under-life developing beneath the surface of dominant worlds.”<sup>27</sup> The subterranean under-life that develops out of a subordinate situation can lead to a variety of responses: different narrative actions. Plummer categorises these different types of narrative action people can engage in as “actions that help them resist or rebel, accommodate or assimilate to dominating tales.”<sup>28</sup> Plummer creates a spectrum with those who conform to the dominant social narrative by engaging in collaborative narrative actions on one end, and those who reject it and engage in rebellious narrative actions on the other. Rebellious narrative actions “argue against, and find ways to reject, dominant stories”<sup>29</sup> and are overtly political. They reject the dominant narratives that exist within society and seek change, which can lead to the creation of counter-narratives.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Plummer, *Narrative Power*, 75.

<sup>28</sup> Plummer, *Narrative Power*, 73.

<sup>29</sup> Plummer, *Narrative Power*, 77.

Plummer highlights that counter-narratives can come from either side of the political spectrum: “they come from those who look back to a better past (‘Traditionalists’) and those who look forwards to a changed better future (‘Progressivists’).”<sup>30</sup> An example given for the latter is the ACT UP movement from the 1980s.

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<sup>30</sup> Plummer, *Narrative Power*, 77-78.

## Methodology

In order to answer the question of how AIDS literature written by homosexual authors during the early years of the AIDS epidemic related to Plummer's concept of narrative power, I selected a corpus based on the following criteria: the text was written during the AIDS epidemic in the United States of America and the story takes place there during that time period. The writer had to be an openly homosexual man since that was the population group that suffered most from the AIDS epidemic and its social and institutional consequences. The text would explore different social narratives about homosexuality and AIDS. Finally, AIDS had to be a big theme of the text.

This resulted in me selecting Larry Kramer's play *The Normal Heart*, Tony Kushner's play *Angels in America: a gay fantasia on national themes*, and Paul Monette's book *Borrowed Time: an AIDS memoir*. *The Normal Heart* was published in 1985 and takes place in New York City between 1981 and 1984. In *Borrowed Time*, published in 1988, Monette primarily writes about his life from 1984 to 1986, when he was living in Los Angeles. *Angels in America* was published in 1992 and the majority of the play takes place between October 1985 and January 1986 in New York City. *Part one: Millenium Approaches* was written in 1988 and *Part two: Perestroika* in 1990.

As I had not interacted with these texts before this research and was thus not aware of which elements would feature most prominently, I created a list of topics that I expected to come across in these texts and which I deemed potentially useful for my research. These topics were:

- Judgement for the queer community from those outside the community.
- Judgement from within the queer community.
- Support for the queer community from those outside the community.
- Support from within the queer community.

- The institutional consequences of an AIDS diagnosis.
- The social consequences of an AIDS diagnosis.
- Institutional inaction during the AIDS epidemic, differentiating between the media, political institutions, and healthcare institutions.
- Queer activism and resistance.
- Sexuality and sexual health.
- A lack of knowledge about AIDS within the medical field (in order to differentiate inaction from a lack of knowledge and genuine misunderstanding of the disease).
- Religion.
- References to the power of narratives.

In order to aid in the process of comparing the quantity of topics between the texts each topic was assigned a specific colour which corresponded to sticky notes that would be used to indicate these passages in the texts.

From there I noted which elements the three works I chose had in common and decided on which ones I would most like to report. This resulted in the main focus being on media coverage, conservative politics, and queer activism and community support.

## Results

### **Borrowed Time: Navigating the AIDS Epidemic Through Memoir writing**

*Borrowed Time* differs from the other two text analysed here because it is heavily rooted in the real life experiences of the author. Paul Monette's memoir, "Borrowed Time," stands as a poignant testimony to the harrowing era of the AIDS epidemic that connects bridge individual experiences with larger societal narratives. Monette's memoir unveils a deeply personal yet universally resonant account of love, loss, and the fight against prejudice. John Clum has describes Monette as “the paradigmatic writer in this new barren land of displacement, pain, and loss [known as AIDS fiction] . . . whose memoir defines both the sweetness and the horror of what AIDS means to a gay man touched tragically by the disease.”<sup>31</sup>

When analysing Monette’s memoir it is important to acknowledge the interplay between reality and the representation. There are multiple instances where Monette references the diaries he kept throughout his life and he occasionally lift passages directly from these diaries, which give the story he is telling a feeling of authenticity. Monette endeavoured to keep his memoir true to reality but there are instances where he acknowledges that he did not keep a meticulous record of everything that was happening due to the emotional turmoil he was experiencing as his life was thrown into chaos by the diagnosis and subsequent illness of not only Roger but many of his friends as well, which might have caused him to misremember certain events. Monette also addressed the fact that his account of what happened and the way he represents the people in his life might be biased due to his own feelings, particularly his love for his at the time recently deceased partner Roger Horwitz. A passage that exemplifies this reads: “If I idealise [Roger] out of proportion

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<sup>31</sup> John M. Clum, ““The Time before the War”: AIDS, Memory, and Desire,” *American Literature* 62, no. 4 (December 1990): 648. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2927073>



in saying so, well, beware the storyteller then.”<sup>32</sup> This statement also shows that Monette had an awareness of the way a writer can shape the narrative and influence the reader. This is not surprising considering that Monette was already an established writer before he started working on his memoir. As someone well versed in the field of literature and the study thereof, it is not unlikely that he constructed his memoir in a way that would have the biggest possible effect on his readership. These admission from Monette underlines the complexities of memoir-writing, where memory and emotion intersect to create a narrative that speaks both to lived experiences and the creative process.

While the other works analysed only make use of fictional names, with the exception of the fictionalised version of Roy Cohn in *Angels in America*, *Borrowed Time* only uses the real names of people. In order to make a clear distinction between my discussions of the author and his life and my discussions of what is represented in the memoir, I will henceforth refer to the author and his partner as Monette and Horwitz and use Paul and Roger for the characters in the memoir.

Douglas Eisner referred to *Borrowed Time* and the most famous personal AIDS in existence and states that “*Borrowed Time* was the first, and has been the only, narrative about AIDS to become a national best seller.”<sup>33</sup> Eisner attributes the memoir’s success not only to the way the narrative resonated with those within the queer community but also to the way the memoir manages to humanize the tragedy of the AIDS crisis to those outside of the queer community. Eisner describes Paul and Roger as “the stable, secure gay bourgeois couple.”<sup>34</sup> He argues that this element is what made Paul and Roger’s story relatable for mainstream audiences. A similar observation was made by John Clum, who describes Paul and Roger as living a life that is representative of the American dream, which makes them likeable and

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<sup>32</sup> Paul Monette, *Borrowed Time: An AIDS Memoir* (Orlando: Harcourt Inc., 1988), 227-228.

<sup>33</sup> Eisner, “Liberating Narrative,” 213.

<sup>34</sup> Eisner, “Liberating Narrative,” 216.

relatable to mainstream audiences and makes their lives being changed by AIDS all the more devastating since “what is shattered in *Borrowed Time* is a gay version of the American dream of suburban, married bliss.”<sup>35</sup>

Clum writes that Paul and Roger were “an affluent couple, lawyer and writer, beautifully, devotedly in love, in a beautiful house-cum-pool in the L.A. suburbs, wealthy enough to give to the right causes, seemed untouchable,” and that “the invasion of the home of Paul and Roger by HIV is not only an invasion of one loving couple, one household, or of gay culture; it is an invasion of the American dream itself.”<sup>36</sup> To Clum and Eisner, Paul and Roger represented an ideal and as such they were not the kind of people most audiences would think of when imagining gay men affected by AIDS. Clum attributes the memoir’s success to this, stating: “Monette and Horwitz lived the dream liberal television and film-makers gave gay men, when they showed us at all, in the 1980s.”<sup>37</sup>

Clum and Eisner both point out that the lives of Paul and Roger were not representative of the lives of gay men during the AIDS crisis. Whilst it is true that Paul and Roger were not as visible as the flamboyant gays or outspoken activists, they were not content to sit by and do nothing while their community got devastated. They contributed to charities and Monette used his platform to speak out against social inequality. Monette’s memoir makes it abundantly clear that heterosexual people and queer people did not receive equal treatment socially, politically, or professionally. Monette used his platform to speak of the struggles the queer community faced and diminishing his efforts because he and his partner came to occupy a position of relative privilege within society does not do justice to the role Monette played in communicating his own struggles and those of the queer community to mainstream audiences.

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<sup>35</sup> Clum, “AIDS, Memory, and Desire,” 649-650.

<sup>36</sup> Clum, “AIDS, Memory, and Desire,” 649.

<sup>37</sup> Clum, “AIDS, Memory, and Desire,” 650.

While *Borrowed Time* is not overtly activist in tone in the way *The Normal Heart* is, *Borrowed Time* is still political despite its focus on personal experiences. Eisner observed that “the memoir's publication date, 1988, was a year of continued anger and activism by ACT-UP and others in response to blatant inaction by the Reagan administration.”<sup>38</sup> Monette’s memoir reflects this sentiment, making it both a literary work and an example of rebellious narrative action by shedding light on the urgent need for governmental intervention and healthcare research.

Monette masterfully delves into the complexities of Paul and Roger's relationship, reflecting on the impact of AIDS on their lives. One of the ways in which he represents the devastating impact of the disease on their lives as well as on their entire generation of gay men is through war imagery.”<sup>39</sup> Monette does this by referring to the AIDS epidemic as “the war” numerous times throughout the memoir, but the passage that most strongly captures the sentiment Monette tries to convey is one in which he references a work from Bishop Moore:

“[I] read to Roger a passage from a memoir Moore had written about coming home from war:

*A man who has been to war will never be the same, for he has lost the virginity of living around the edges of life, and in the long gray waste of combat has had crushed his belief in smaller things.... It is enough for a man to live cleanly and quietly in peace with a few friends.*

That is what a whole generation of gay men are doing, as they care for each other and bury each other and take what respite they can in between. It all depends how close it has touched you, of course, how much you then feel that your near relations are all you really have.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Eisner, “Liberating Narrative,” 213.

<sup>39</sup> Susan Balée, “From the Outside In: A History of American Autobiography,” *The Hudson Review* 51, no. 1 (Spring, 1998): 50. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3853119>

<sup>40</sup> Monette, *Borrowed Time*, 282.

The depiction of the AIDS epidemic as a war serves as a vivid metaphor for the onslaught of suffering and the fight for survival that characterized this period. This aspect of Monette's memoir has been recognised by many, with John Clum declaring that "Monette's memoir is not just of him and Rog: it is a memoir of AIDS itself and the way it is decimating a culture."<sup>41</sup>

Monette's poignant portrayal of Paul's struggle to save Roger underscores the helplessness experienced by countless individuals during the AIDS epidemic, who despite all of their best efforts were ultimately forced to watch their loved ones succumb to the disease. Some scholars, notably Douglas Eisner, have claimed that by showing this aspect of the epidemic the memoir reinforces the social ideas that portray homosexual love as being inferior to heterosexual love: "Monette abandons any hope of working through the epidemic *through* his generic choices, by debasing his heroic efforts [to save Roger], and by proving that homosexual love cannot hope to conquer all, thereby making it less worthy than heterosexual love."<sup>42</sup> This argument might have been upheld better if it was made in regards to a fictional narrative rather than an account of the author's personal life. Whilst it is true that Paul is unable to save Roger, the text never implies that this is a result of their love being less worthy than heterosexual love. Paul is unable to save Roger because that is what happened in real life, and altering the narrative in a way that results in Paul managing to save Roger from the disease would undermine the reality of what it was like for people during the AIDS crisis. The memoir captures the heartbreaking reality that no amount of love and support was sufficient to combat an at the time deadly disease, and a narrative that suggest otherwise would be unfair to the countless people affected by the epidemic.

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<sup>41</sup> Clum, "AIDS, Memory, and Desire," 649.

<sup>42</sup> Eisner, "Liberating Narrative," 218.

Monette, as well as Kramer and Kushner, underscores the pivotal role that government efforts and healthcare research have addressing the epidemic, and in doing so their narratives manage to emphasise the damage that was done by the lack of care the conservative government afforded the homosexual community. If AIDS fiction in which tragedy befalls the homosexual couple suggests that homosexual love is lesser than heterosexual love, then it is only made possible because the lack of institutional care made it so. Homosexual couples did not have the same rights as heterosexual couples and they were not afforded the same care, which allowed them to be disproportionately affected by the tragedies of disease.

Monette spends a lot of time discussing the guilt that Paul feels for Roger's illness. Part of this stems from the fact that Roger, who "was comfortable with relative monogamy, even at a time when certain quarters of the gay world found the whole idea trivial and bourgeois,"<sup>43</sup> is the one who developed AIDS while Paul remained healthy. Another part of this guilt comes from Paul blaming himself for "bringing AIDS into their relationship through his need to make up for "lost time" through casual sex."<sup>44</sup> This is seen in passages such as this one: "I was already riddled with guilt: None of this would be happening if I'd never had sex with strangers".<sup>45</sup> Paul's self-blame parallels a broader societal misconception: the conflation of AIDS with sexual promiscuity, a fallacy that unfairly demonized the homosexual community<sup>46</sup> which was known for its liberal attitude towards sexual relationships. However, Monette acknowledges that his feelings of guilt are not entirely rational: "the disease wasn't drawn to obsessive sex or meaningless sex. Sex itself,

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<sup>43</sup> Monette, *Borrowed Time*, 5.

<sup>44</sup> Eisner, "Liberating Narrative," 218.

<sup>45</sup> Monette, *Borrowed Time*, 32.

<sup>46</sup> Eisner, "Liberating Narrative," 218.

pure and simple, was the medium, and the world out there was ravenous for it. Straight and gay alike.”<sup>47</sup>

By confronting this misconception, Monette challenges the narrative surrounding sexual promiscuity and the queer community. This also comes up in *The Normal Heart*:

“Why don’t they teach any [gay history] in school? If they did, maybe [Alan Turning] wouldn’t have killed himself and maybe you wouldn’t be so afraid of who you are. The only way we’ll have real pride is when we demand recognition of a culture that isn’t just sexual. It’s all there – all throughout history we’ve been there; but we have to claim it, and identity who was in it, and articulate what’s in our minds and hearts and all our creative contributions to this earth. And until we do that, and until we organize ourselves block by neighbourhood by city by state into a united visible community that fights back, we’re doomed.”<sup>48</sup>

AIDS complicated gay history. The gay liberation movement of the sixties had fought to equate sex with life and freedom, but the epidemic changed this into an association between sex and death.<sup>49</sup> “The past was not just the glorious memories of Whitmanesque, celebratory male coupling; it is also the possibly poisonous sexual/immunological past of you, your partner, his partners, lo until the beginning of time.”<sup>50</sup> Paul spends a lot of time thinking about which of his or Roger’s partners might have spread the HIV virus, and whilst this may seem futile and like a waste of time since there is no way for them to possibly know who contracted the disease from whom, it is important to acknowledge the past. Clum states that “one way or another, AIDS literature must deal with past sexuality = present disease in a way that either breaks the chain [of associating homosexuality with promiscuity and thus disease]

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<sup>47</sup> Monette, *Borrowed Time*, 33.

<sup>48</sup> Larry Kramer, *The Normal Heart and The Destiny of Me: Two Plays* (New York: Grove Press, 2014), 71-72.

<sup>49</sup> Clum, “AIDS, Memory, and Desire,” 652.

<sup>50</sup> Clum, “AIDS, Memory, and Desire,” 652.

or at least affirms the past in a healing way.”<sup>51</sup> That Paul thinks about and acknowledges the sexual past and the role it played in Roger getting diagnosed with AIDS without thinking negatively of sexual promiscuity is a representation of how the queer community can interact with the sexual past. No one can deny the role sexual promiscuity played in the spread of the HIV virus but that does not mean that promiscuity and sexual freedom are inherently bad. Monette writes about what the culture surrounding sex was like before the AIDS epidemic, and this provides the necessary context for a new attitude towards sexual promiscuity.

### **The fear of historical erasure**

As Monette's memoir attests, AIDS irreversibly altered the trajectory of the queer community's history. As Monette references in his memoir, queer history was not one that was recorded: “most of the rest of gay history lies in shallow bachelors' graves,”<sup>52</sup> and he compares his and Roger’s experience to one that was seen often in “the growing oral history of AIDS records.”<sup>53</sup>

Gay history lived on through the people within the community who passed these stories on, and when the AIDS crisis claimed the lives of thousands of gay men, a lot of this history got lost. As Clum states: “The time before [AIDS] is irretrievable, and therein lies the real pain. Not only are men lost, a culture is waning.”<sup>54</sup> The government’s lack of action only added to the devastation and, as is reflected in *Borrowed Time* and *The Normal Heart*, it gave people the impression that the government was allowing this erasure to happen. Monette's memoir stands as a testament to the fragility of history in the face of erasure, underscoring the imperative to document and commemorate the lives lost, and the importance of Monette’s

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<sup>51</sup> Clum, “AIDS, Memory, and Desire,” 653.

<sup>52</sup> Monette, *Borrowed Time*, 20.

<sup>53</sup> Monette, *Borrowed Time*, 65.

<sup>54</sup> Clum, “AIDS, Memory, and Desire,” 650.

memoir and the role plays in the recording of gay history has rightfully been acknowledged by many scholars. As Susan Balée wrote: “Monette himself is now dead of AIDS, but this memoir will endure as a testament to the early years of the epidemic . . . [Monette] is likely to be remembered as one of the important recorders of gay life in the plague years of fin-de-millennium America.”<sup>55</sup>

Monette first started writing about AIDS in a poetry project with a friend. When reflecting on this project, he wrote: “I was writing with a very blunt instrument, but groping at last toward leaving a record—to say we have been here.”<sup>56</sup> Randy Shilts also writes about the importance of documenting the AIDS crisis: “It is a tale that bears telling, so that it will never happen again, to any people, anywhere.”<sup>57</sup>

Monette was keenly aware how easy it would be for gay history to be erased: “The course of our lives had paralleled the course of the [gay right’s] movement itself since Stonewall, and now our bitterness about the indifference of the system made us feel keenly how tenuous our history was. Everything we had been together—brothers and friends beyond anything the suffocating years in the closet could dream of—might yet be wiped away. If we all died and all our books were burned, then a hundred years from now no one would ever know. So we figured we had to know and name it ourselves, tell each other what we had become in coming out.”<sup>58</sup>

The mention of book burning brings forth imagery of the holocaust, when nazis would burn Jewish books and records. This is the second time Monette draws a comparison between the AIDS crisis and the holocaust, since earlier in the memoir he stated that the moralists

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<sup>55</sup> Balée, “From the Outside In,” 51.

<sup>56</sup> Monette, *Borrowed Time*, 152.

<sup>57</sup> Randy Shilts, *And The Band Played On: Politics, People and the AIDS Epidemic* 1988 ed. (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2021), xxiii.

<sup>58</sup> Monette, *Borrowed Time*, 227-228.



vision of AIDS was that of “a final closet is clean and efficient as Buchenwald,”<sup>59</sup> a nazi concentration camp.

A more outspoken comparison between the social stigmatisation of homosexuals during the AIDS crisis and the holocaust is seen in *The Normal Heart*, in which Ned draws a parallel between the media’s silence on the prosecution of Jews and the lack of coverage of the AIDS crisis, stating that in both instances the media only started reporting on it once it was already too late.<sup>60</sup>

### **The Reagan Era: damning institutional inaction during a health crisis**

“Ineffective commissions, [inadequate] budgets, and stalled education and research campaigns will be the sad legacy of Ronald Reagan on AIDS.”<sup>61</sup> These words from David France are echoed throughout the primary texts, as each of them point out the lack of action taken by the Reagan administration in the early years of the epidemic.

The prevailing sentiment during the first four years of the AIDS epidemic was a sense of collective deafness within the Reagan era, as pointed out by Monette.<sup>62</sup>

The government's inability or unwillingness to act led to a tragic loss of lives, further compounded by the sluggishness of response. The frustration and anger of those affected by the epidemic was palpable: “now [in 1988] we know stride could have been made in ’82 or ’83 if the government hasn’t been playing ostrich.”<sup>63</sup> Monette goes on to write: “I want to tap into the rage of the positives so we can throw buckets of sheep’s blood on the White House lawn and spit in the faces of cops with yellow gloves,”<sup>64</sup> and that “the longer I watch the

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<sup>59</sup> Monette, *Borrowed Time*, 32.

<sup>60</sup> Kramer, *The Normal Heart*, 21.

<sup>61</sup> David France, *How to Survive a Plague: the story of how activists and scientists tamed AIDS* (New York: Picador, 2016), 337.

<sup>62</sup> Monette, *Borrowed Time*, 109.

<sup>63</sup> Monette, *Borrowed Time*, 119.

<sup>64</sup> Monette, *Borrowed Time*, 165.

government do nothing, the months thrown away with the lives of my friends, the more I see it didn't have to happen."<sup>65</sup> Shilts has also reported on this and he referred to the Reagan administration's response to the AIDS epidemic as "miserable."<sup>66</sup>

Margaret Heckler's announcement during the first international AIDS conference in 1985, marked a turning point in the administration's acknowledgment of the crisis, but by then it was already too late. By the time President Reagan had delivered his first speech on the epidemic of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, 36,058 Americans had been diagnosed with the disaster; 20,849 had died."<sup>67</sup> Monette writes about Heckler's announcement in his memoir, stating: "Health and Human Services' Margaret Heckler announced that the Reagan government was going to do something at last, now that the disease was a threat to "the general population." The conference added precious little new to the body of evidence. It was split along French and American lines, the prima donnas still squabbling about who invented HIV. Priorities, please: there were royalties to be protected."<sup>68</sup>

*The Normal Heart* also points out that politics and profit seemed to take priority when it came to the government's involvement in AIDS research:

EMMA. Five million dollars doesn't seem quite right for some two thousand cases. The government spent twenty million investigating seven deaths from Tylenol. We are now almost into the third year of this epidemic.

EXAMINING DOCTOR. Unfortunately, President Reagan has threatened to veto. As you know, he's gone on record as being unalterably and irrevocably opposed to anything that might be construed as an endorsement of homosexuality. Naturally this has slowed things down.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Monette, *Borrowed Time*, 292.

<sup>66</sup> Shilts, *And The Band Played On*, 473.

<sup>67</sup> Shilts, *And The Band Played On*, 596.

<sup>68</sup> Monette, *Borrowed Time*, 108-109.

<sup>69</sup> Kramer, *The Normal Heart*, 65.

Kramer blames Reagan's opposition of homosexuality for the government's lack of action, and while Kramer's play is a dramatization of historical events, this passage highlights what was happening in real life. Shilts reported that "within the executive branch of the government, there seemed little excitement about launching anything like a coordinated attack on the disease. Initiatives for development of a vaccine and effective treatment pattered along at their usual speed."<sup>70</sup> The slow-moving bureaucratic response exacerbated the crisis, leaving a grim mark on history. Larry Kramer would refer to the FDA as "the single most incomprehensible bottleneck in American bureaucratic history – one that is actually prolonging this roll call of death."<sup>71</sup> Scholars like Thomas Yingling would go on to state that AIDS had more similarities with a genocide than with a plague: "it is the power of others to inflict dying that continues to shape the history of AIDS: the benign neglect of government agencies makes the epidemic a passive-aggressive act on the part of national society."<sup>72</sup>

The establishment of the Presidential Commission of the HIV Epidemic in 1987 was met with low expectations from those who had observed the government's response, but it proved to be the final nail in the coffin of the Reagan administration's legacy. David France reports that "no one expected anything meaningful from the Presidential AIDS Commission, but few could have predicted the flamboyant mess it became."<sup>73</sup> Once details about the commissions members were made public, it became clear that no one on the commission had any clinical experience with AIDS. France goes on to report that "the nation's most distinguishes scientist blasted the composition as downright irresponsible."<sup>74</sup> One of the consequences of this committee was a complete loss of faith in the Reagan administration's

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<sup>70</sup> Shilts, *And The Band Played On*, 586.

<sup>71</sup> France, *How to Survive a Plague*, 254.

<sup>72</sup> Frieden, *Telling Time*, 11.

<sup>73</sup> France, *How to Survive a Plague*, 290.

<sup>74</sup> France, *How to Survive a Plague*, 273.

appointment of officials who would handle the AIDS crisis. Monette writes: “It was said that everyone appointed by the Reagan administration in a major public health capacity was either a Mormon or a fundamentalist. The chief spokesman for the administration now was the overripe and venomous Patrick Buchanan, one of whose major qualifications for the job was his widely quoted remark that nature was finally exacting her price on homosexuals for having spilled their seed against her.”<sup>75</sup>

The legacy of the Reagan administration is also represented in *Angels in America*, wherein Louis finds it hard to believe that Joe voted for Reagan because he is nice to him and seems genuinely concerned about Prior being ill, which Louis cannot reconcile with Joe’s support for Reagan. There is also this passage, in which Prior not getting better physically is paralleled to Reagan not becoming a better president – an interesting parallel since the slow response of the Reagan administration is to blame for the lack of a more readily available treatment:

JOE. I hope he gets better.

LOUIS. Reagan?

JOE. Your friend.

LOUIS. He won’t. Neither will Reagan.<sup>76</sup>

The writings of Kushner, Kramer, and Monnet highlight the way politics influenced the American healthcare system during the AIDS crisis.

The lack of readily available treatments for HIV is an issue that persists to this day, as reported on by Sarah Shulman: “while advocates were able, in a sense, to beat HIV, they could not beat capitalism. And so, today, because of the greed of institutional pharmaceutical

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<sup>75</sup> Monette, *Borrowed Time*, 166.

<sup>76</sup> Tony Kushner, *Angels in America, Parts One and Two* 1995 ed. (London: Nick Hern Books, 2017), 72-73.

companies and various health industries, large numbers of people with HIV in the United States and around the world cannot receive medications that already exist. For this reason, around three-quarters of a million people throughout the world still die every year of a disease that is entirely manageable.”<sup>77</sup> The experiences of characters like Roy Cohn, who leveraged his connections to access medical trials unavailable to others, shed light on the disparities in healthcare accessibility based on privilege and influence:

BELIZE. There are maybe thirty people in the whole country who are getting on [AZT].

ROY. Now there are thirty-one.

BELIZE. There are a hundred thousand people who need it. Look at you. The dragon atop the golden horde. It's not fair, is it?

ROY. No, but as Jimmy Carter said, neither is life.<sup>78</sup>

Roy Cohn is an interesting character to look at in relation to the American healthcare system. He is presented as a staunch believer in American values and as typical Republican, which makes his declarations that “Americans have no use for sick” and America being “just no country for the infirm”<sup>79</sup> very interesting. While Roy's self-loathing and struggle with his illness shape his perspective, his words echo the ideologies of some aligned with the Republican party. This disheartening sentiment highlights the prevalence of a healthcare perspective that places economic and societal contributions above individual well-being.

Kramer, Kushner, and Monette also address the dehumanizing treatment of AIDS patients. Heather Houser reports on a time when “some workers...still refused to bring trays to the bedsides of people hospitalized with AIDS.”<sup>80</sup> Houser also discusses the institutional

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<sup>77</sup> Schulman, *Let The Record Show*, 10.

<sup>78</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 186.

<sup>79</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 203-204.

<sup>80</sup> Houser, *Ecosickness*, 46.

failing from a healthcare system that “neglects the most vulnerable”.<sup>81</sup> The healthcare system was not the only institution that was neglecting AIDS patients. David France reports on another harrowing element of the epidemic: “the patients’ indignities did not end with death. Across New York, the global epicentre of this outbreak, almost every undertaker refused to work with the corpses. Even in the ancient plagues of Europe there were individuals tasked with collecting remains.”<sup>82</sup>

### **Deafening silence and institutional indifference**

The haunting words, “it will be recorded that the dead in the first decade of the calamity died of our indifference,”<sup>83</sup> reverberate through the pages of Paul Monette's memoir, resounding as a damning indictment of society's collective apathy during the early years of the AIDS crisis. With this statement, Monette lays bare the disturbing truth that the tragic deaths of countless individuals were largely due to the combination of institutional inaction and societal stigma. Randy Shilts, a chronicler of the AIDS epidemic, corroborates Monette's observations through his own investigations into the initial responses to the crisis. Shilts writes: “from 1980 [...] nearly five years passed before all these institutions—medicine, public health, the federal and private scientific research establishments, the mass media, and the gay community’s leadership—mobilized the way they should have in a time of threat. The story of the first five years of AIDS in America is a drama of great national failure, played out against a backdrop of needless death.”<sup>84</sup> It is within this disheartening context that Monette's memoir unfolds, shedding light on the media's baffling lack of coverage and the stigmatisation surrounding AIDS and homosexuality.

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<sup>81</sup> Houser, *Ecosickness*, 35.

<sup>82</sup> France, *How to Survive a Plague*, 92.

<sup>83</sup> Monette, *Borrowed Time*, 18.

<sup>84</sup> Shilts, *And The Band Played On*, xxii.

Monette expresses a lot of anger towards lack of attention mainstream media paid to the AIDS crisis, calling out the lack of media coverage numerous times:

“If the government was stone-deaf, the press was mute. The media are convinced in 1987 that they're doing a great job reporting the AIDS story, and there's no denying they've grasped the horror. But for four years they let the bureaucracies get away with passive genocide, dismissing a no-win problem perceived as affecting only an underclass or two. 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, it would have been covered like nuclear war.”<sup>85</sup>

The epidemic, as Monette notes, disproportionately effected homosexual men, a marginalized social group. It became apparent to Monette that the mainstream media was underreporting on AIDS, not because they were unaware of what was happening, but because they had made an active choice not to report on it. Monette goes on to write: “the indifference of the press remained deafening; AIDS activists liked to talk about the occasion when the *New York Times* devoted front-page space to a disease that felled seventeen Lippizaner stallions in Europe, when no story about AIDS had ever appeared on page one.”<sup>86</sup> This example makes it clear just how important the mainstream pressed deemed the AIDS crisis to be.

This was in stark contrast to reports published in *The Advocate*, an LGBT magazine. Monette recalls a seminal article titled "Is Sex Making Us Sick?" published in 1982, which marked a turning point in awareness: “it was the first in-depth reporting I'd read that laid out the shadowy nonfacts of what till then had been the most fragmented of rumors. The first cases were reported to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) only six months before, but they weren't in the newspapers, not in L.A.”<sup>87</sup> Monette's observation, that *The Advocate* was

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<sup>85</sup> Monette, *Borrowed Time*, 110.

<sup>86</sup> Monette, *Borrowed Time*, 227.

<sup>87</sup> Monette, *Borrowed Time*, xx.

the only source documenting these early cases underscores the queer community's reliance on their own community-based information network, which Monette later starts referring to as the underground.

Shilts' exploration of media responses echoes Monette's sentiments, revealing that news organizations were uncomfortable covering AIDS stories due to their connection with homosexuality. Shilts wrote: "People died and nobody paid attention because the mass media did not like covering stories about homosexuals and was especially skittish about stories that involved gay sexuality."<sup>88</sup>

There was a shift in media coverage in 1985, with the emergence of what Monette refers to as "the Rock Hudson media show."<sup>89</sup> Rock Hudson was a film star who got diagnosed with AIDS in the summer of 1985. His diagnosis was covered extensively by the press and it led to a shift in the public's attitude towards AIDS: "Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome had seemed a comfortably distant threat to most of those who had heard of it before, the misfortune of people who fit into rather distinct classes of social outcasts and social pariahs. [With Hudson's diagnosis,] the AIDS epidemic became palpable and the threat loomed everywhere."<sup>90</sup> Shilts acknowledges this moment as a transformative event separated American history into a time before and after AIDS. However, Shilts also acknowledges that this newfound awareness "reflected the unalterable tragedy at the heart of the AIDS epidemic: By the time America paid attention to the disease, it was too late to do anything about it."<sup>91</sup>

The increased media attention led to more awareness about AIDS but it also amplified the apocalyptic narratives surrounding the disease, to the dismay of Monette: "In the last week of July [1985], a wave of AIDS stories seemed to cluster on the news, all of

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<sup>88</sup> Shilts, *And The Band Played On*, xxii-xxiii.

<sup>89</sup> Monette, *Borrowed Time*, 225.

<sup>90</sup> Shilts, *And The Band Played On*, xxi.

<sup>91</sup> Shilts, *And The Band Played On*, xxi.



them bad. . . . There was never a word about antivirals or any other treatment. The “always fatal” illness, they said.”<sup>92</sup> Monette criticizes the media for highlighting only the dire aspects of AIDS while conspicuously omitting coverage of medical advancements and treatment options. This skewed narrative created a culture of fear and exemplified the apocalyptic rhetoric that surrounded many AIDS narratives.<sup>93</sup> The media also had a tendency to “play up the open display of sexuality,”<sup>94</sup> which spread the idea within the gay community that AIDS “was centred on those at the sexual frontier who were fucking their brains out,”<sup>95</sup> and negatively impacted the public’s perception of the gay community.

Monette mentions reports of a "gay cancer" emerging in 1980.<sup>96</sup> Monette recalls that these reports lacked information and David France looks at this report “as just another lie, a call to more hatred, a fiercer backlash.”<sup>97</sup> France denounces early media stories about AIDS as slanderous and paranoid, stating that “anyone could see prejudice in what news of [the gay community] was or was not being covered.”<sup>98</sup> France also reports on how “minor advance in public attention brought sickening waves of violence”<sup>99</sup> against the queer community. The media coverage of the AIDS crisis is further complicated by the frequent omission of the political aspects of the epidemic. As Shilts points out: “for all the coverage of the epidemic, there were precious few paragraphs delving into the politics of AIDS.”<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Monette, *Borrowed Time*, 155.

<sup>93</sup> Frieden, *Telling Time*, 8.

<sup>94</sup> Shilts, *And The Band Played On*, 18.

<sup>95</sup> Monette, *Borrowed Time*, 5.

<sup>96</sup> Monette, *Borrowed Time*, 3.

<sup>97</sup> France, *How to Survive a Plague*, 14.

<sup>98</sup> France, *How to Survive a Plague*, 14.

<sup>99</sup> France, *How to Survive a Plague*, 69.

<sup>100</sup> Shilts, *And The Band Played On*, 323.

## Disappearing Acts

Shilts reports that the mainstream media was not solely responsible to the erasure of AIDS-related deaths. He writes: “sometimes newspapers concealed AIDS as the cause of death because the news writers found it embarrassing; more frequently, because the family did.”

Monette also draws attention to the deliberate concealment of AIDS-related hospitalizations and deaths, a practice he refers to as “the disappearing.”<sup>101</sup> Monette writes that it was: “a time when I would hear at least every other week about the discreet death by AIDS of one or another rich man, the cause of death fudged on the certificate or otherwise unreported. Every gay man I know has stories of married bisexual men who died in the secret enclaves of family, town, church, and local GP, all without saying the “A” word. Even certain gay doctors, we heard, would blur a death certificate if the family was mortified enough.”<sup>102</sup> *Angels in America* features this ‘disappearing’ through the character of Roy Cohn, who disguises his AIDS diagnosis as liver cancer. This parallels the real-life Roy Cohn, who “insisted he had liver cancer, even while he used his political connections to get on an experimental AIDS treatment protocol at the National Institutes of Health Hospital.”<sup>103</sup>

Monette explores the motives behind this practice. Reputation emerges as compelling factors, as prominent individuals lied to protect their posthumous public images.”<sup>104</sup> This was not without consequences, as pointed out by Shilts. “The reluctance of prominent people to publicly acknowledge their AIDS diagnoses left obituary columns strangely empty of actual flesh-and-blood people who were dying to the syndrome. Only the most knowledgeable of obituary readers could detect the presence of this epidemic in the death notice.”<sup>105</sup> Monette

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<sup>101</sup> Monette, *Borrowed Time*, 18.

<sup>102</sup> Monette, *Borrowed Time*, 308.

<sup>103</sup> Shilts, *And The Band Played On*, 585-586.

<sup>104</sup> Shilts, *And The Band Played On*, 586.

<sup>105</sup> Shilts, *And The Band Played On*, 472.

talks about how the underground would telegraph these obituaries out of “a need to say out loud what the press and the wary so often blur.”<sup>106</sup>

Monette is not the only one to have pointed out this aspect of the AIDS epidemic, as many scholars have emphasised the role a fear of social and institutional consequences played in people keeping quiet about their diagnosis with AIDS. Susan Balée explained: “[AIDS] bred alienation and isolation in its sufferers – in those early days, jobs and careers were lost; victims were often abandoned by their lovers and families.”<sup>107</sup> This rejection has also been reported on by Sarah Schulman. In regards to AIDS patients she wrote: “With the lack of treatments and services also came the abandonment by family-if they hadn’t already thrown you out for being queer. Life was surrounded by death. There was the systematic loss of friends who were your support network and the witnesses to your life, the deaths of whom became the end of context and memory. There was the loss of jobs, the end of careers, the disappearance of income, the losing of your apartment.”<sup>108</sup>

Monette shares that Roger’s AIDS diagnoses was kept secret for a while. Part of this was due to the fear of social consequences, even though the majority of their contacts had already dealt with AIDS themselves. Another factor in their secrecy was the knowledge that Roger would lose his job.

Schulman made the observation that, prior to the AIDS crisis, homosexual couples were among the most affluent people in the United States due to the vast majority of them being a dual income household – although they were not officially recognised as such. She describes the AIDS epidemic as being “a sudden, shocking reality check that the powers that be in the U.S. government, and in industry, and in family, did not care what happened to gay

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<sup>106</sup> Monette, *Borrowed Time*, 112.

<sup>107</sup> Balée, “From the Outside In,” 50.

<sup>108</sup> Schulman, *Let The Record Show*, 7.

male lives, even if some of those institutions included gay individuals in power position.”<sup>109</sup> She further points out that AIDS “literally made gay men visible as they sickened and died in public, but even then many industries, including traditionally gay-friendly ones like arts, design, and entertainment, refuse to represent the AIDS crisis experiences accurately or at all.”<sup>110</sup>

Whist Monette acknowledges the reasons people may have for lying about an AIDS diagnosis – which he shares he and Roger did for a while as well– he highlights the dangerous consequences of denying the reality of AIDS-related deaths. People wanted to distance themselves from the disease and see it as something that could not happen to them or their loved ones, but in doing so they became less inclined to seek information or care. As Monette stated: “it's not till you first hear it attached to someone you love that you realize how little you know about it.”<sup>111</sup>

Georgia Johnston observed the empowerment that came with sharing Roger’s AIDS diagnosis: “When Paul and Roger admit to themselves and to others that Roger has AIDS, they begin in earnest the defiant war against it: both a struggle to defend Roger’s body using drugs, and a struggle to combat prejudice from government agencies, researchers, journalists, doctors.”<sup>112</sup> This sentiment is also shared by Monette who wrote: “the burden of my own message was that everyone must start demanding these drugs, because the system wasn't out to cut the red tape. Indeed, red tape was—and largely still is—the system.”<sup>113</sup> If people continued to hide their illness, then they would not speak out against the system, and speaking out against the system was the only way to bring about change.

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<sup>109</sup> Schulman, *Let The Record Show*, 21.

<sup>110</sup> Schulman, *Let The Record Show*, 21.

<sup>111</sup> Monette, *Borrowed Time*, 8.

<sup>112</sup> Georgia Johnston, “Geographies of the Closet: the lives of Paul Monette,” *Biography* 25, no. 1 (Winter, 2002): 173-174.

<sup>113</sup> Monette, *Borrowed Time*, 166.

### ***The Normal Heart: the history of AIDS activism***

John Clum describes *The Normal Heart* as “a history of martyrdom of gay men through AIDS, through political indifference, and through what Kramer sees as the disastrously misplaced values of the gay community that continued to affirm sexual liberation as its prime political agenda”.<sup>114</sup> He goes on to state that the relationship between Ned and Felix presents monogamy and gay marriage as “a counter to deadly promiscuity.”<sup>115</sup> This interpretation of Kramer’s message conflicts with the ending of the play, in which Felix dies moments after having married Ned – albeit in an unofficial ceremony. Clum’s interpretation of the play exemplifies the issue of conflating reality and representation that I warned against when discussing Monette’s memoir. *The Normal Heart* is based on real historical events but many people read it as if it is a record of history rather than a fictionalised and dramatized representation of history, which leads to an interpretation of the play that does not do justice to Kramer as a writer and activist. To use the words of David France: No individual was more responsible for galvanizing the AIDS movement than Kramer. His plays, books, and essays over the years pushed the gay community to demand that the world take notice.”<sup>116</sup>

Kramer's writing was rooted in a deep sense of purpose. Kramer explained his motivations for writing the play as follows: “I wrote *The Normal Heart* for one main reason: the world must know about the saddest thing I would ever know. I felt I had an obligation: because fate had placed me on the front line of this epidemic from the very beginning, I was witness to much history that other writers were not.”<sup>117</sup> In the same article, Kramer states that he does not consider himself to be an artist: “I consider myself a very opinionated man who uses words as fighting tools. I perceive certain wrongs that make me very angry, and somehow I hope that if I string my words together with enough skill, people will hear them

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<sup>114</sup> Clum, “Dramatizing Gay Male History,” 187.

<sup>115</sup> Clum, “Dramatizing Gay Male History,” 187.

<sup>116</sup> France, *How to Survive a Plague*, 8.

<sup>117</sup> Kramer, *Reports from the holocaust*, 145.

respond. I am under no delusion that this will necessarily be the case, but I seem to have no choice but to try.”<sup>118</sup> One of the things Kramer was angry about was the political response to the AIDS crisis. Kramer singles out the Koch and Reagan administrations for their failure to acknowledge and address the epidemic, and states that “when the histories of the Koch and Reagan administrations are truthfully written, this scandal [of choosing not to acknowledge the AIDS crisis] will dwarf the political corruption in New York and the foreign-policy blunders of Washington.”<sup>119</sup> This statement from Kramer shows that, according to him, the government was not telling the true narrative and his works reflect this anger towards corrupt institutions.

The theme of activism and its transformative impact on the queer community's fight against AIDS is a central focus in *The Normal Heart*. Even *Borrowed Time*, which is arguably the least political text out of the three, has underlying emphasis on the queer community's need to unite, not just for their present struggles but for the generations to come: “I try to remember that we fight as a ragged people to outlast the calamity so that others can sleep as safe as my friend and I.”<sup>120</sup>

One of the pivotal moments in the history of queer activism was the founding of ACT UP in March 1987 by Larry Kramer and others.<sup>121</sup> While activist organisations inspired many, it should be noted that not many individuals affected by AIDS participated in ACT UP's activities. Many who loved or empathized with AIDS patients refrained from direct action, whether due to fear, social stigma, or the disruptions it could cause in their lives.<sup>122</sup> Therefore we should not only pay attention to the text mentioning ‘official’ acts of protest or resistance.

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<sup>118</sup> Kramer, *Reports from the holocaust*, 145.

<sup>119</sup> Kramer, *Reports from the holocaust*, 144.

<sup>120</sup> Monette, *Borrowed Time*, 125.

<sup>121</sup> Schulman, *Let The Record Show*, xiv.

<sup>122</sup> Schulman, *Let The Record Show*, 8.

ACT UP confronted practices like double-blind trials, where patients were given placebos without their knowledge.<sup>123</sup> This practice is criticized in *Angels in America*:

BELIZE. Watch out for the double blind. They'll want you to sign something that say they can give you M&Ms instead of the real drug. You'll die, but they'll get the statistics they can publish in the *New England Journal of Medicine*. And you can't sue 'cause you signed. And if you don't sign, no pills. So if you have any strings left, pull them, because everyone's put through the double blind and with this, time's against you, you can't fuck around with placebo.

ROY. You hate me.

BELIZE. Yes.

ROY. Why are you telling me this?

BELIZE. I wish I knew.

ROY. You're a butterfingers spook faggot nurse. I think . . . you have little reason to want to help me.

BELIZE. Consider it solidarity. One faggot to another.<sup>124</sup>

Belize hates Roy, but he still chooses to inform him of this practice. His reasoning for doing so is that, despite their differences, Roy is a gay man affected by the AIDS crisis. Belize's actions in this scene illustrate Shilt's statement that "until the government gets going, it's going to be up to this community to save itself."<sup>125</sup>

In Michael Warner's exploration of community formation, he introduces the concept of a counterpublic. Warner writes that "some publics are defined by their tension with a larger public. Their participants are marked off from persons or citizens in general. . . This kind of public is, in effect, a counterpublic: it maintains at some level, conscious or unconscious, an

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<sup>123</sup> Schulman, *Let The Record Show*, 76.

<sup>124</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 155.

<sup>125</sup> Shilts, *And The Band Played On*, 122.

awareness of its subordinate status.”<sup>126</sup> Within these counterpublics, individuals find connection, association, and identity that transforms their private lives. This concept is profoundly reflected in the narratives of AIDS fiction, notably Monette’s. Monette writes about the AIDS crisis making it apparent that the gay community occupied a subordinate place in society and says: “Gay people have had to be taught to take care of their own, having grown so accustomed to taking care of themselves.”<sup>127</sup>

The AIDS epidemic underscored the need for a tight-knit community as gay individuals were forced to care for each other. The act of caring, burying, and supporting one another became both a response to crisis and a powerful assertion of identity. AIDS fiction representing this development did not ““focus on isolation, individualism, and mortality . . . but the importance of relationships, interpersonal responsibilities and the process of living.”<sup>128</sup>

Monette's description of joining the AIDS underground depicts this sense of solidarity and the fight for life. Monette speaks of “join[ing] a community of the stricken who would not lie down and die. All together, we beat down the doors of the system and made it take our count.”<sup>129</sup> The commitment to self-preservation and communal support was a reaction to the systemic negligence and prejudice that marginalized the gay community. This community-building effort went beyond self-preservation; it was also an effort to create a sense of hope amidst the darkness of the epidemic: “If the government was going to continue to act as if we didn't exist, if the medical establishment was prone to gridlock over funds, if the drug companies were waiting till the curve got high enough for profit, then we would find our own way. Whistling in the dark is whistling still.”<sup>130</sup> *Angels in America* also carries a

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<sup>126</sup> Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 56.

<sup>127</sup> Monette, *Borrowed Time*, 34.

<sup>128</sup> Frieden, *Telling Time*, 5.

<sup>129</sup> Monette, *Borrowed Time*, 103.

<sup>130</sup> Monette, *Borrowed Time*, 103.



message of hope regarding the future of the gay community. Prior Walter is visited by the ghosts of his ancestors who died of plagues. Prior 1 talks about the pestilence that decimated entire communities when he was alive, and says it is “much worse than now.”<sup>131</sup> This shows that even a much worse plague does not mean the end of a community. Humanity managed to live on after all, and it suggests that while the AIDS epidemic is terrible it will not mean the end of the gay community.

The emergence of a network of queer people that was fighting for queer people is in accordance with what Warner says: “Counterpublics of sexuality and gender . . . are scenes of association and identity that transform the private lives they mediate. Homosexuals can exist in isolation; but gay people or queers exist by virtue of the world they elaborate together, and gay or queer identity is always fundamentally inflected by the nature of that world.”<sup>132</sup>

### **A culture of sexual promiscuity**

Goldstein wrote that due to the nature of the disease, “all works about AIDS are also about sex.”<sup>133</sup> In *Angels in America* and *Borrowed Time* the relationship between sex and AIDS is acknowledged by the writers, but *The Normal Heart*, the majority of which takes place in 1981 and 1982, takes place during a time when this was not common knowledge and it shows how the culture around sex, especially in the gay community, changed because of the epidemic.

Kramer has been described as a key figure in the effort to make gay men aware of the dangers of HIV infections in the early years of the epidemic before the virus was discovered,<sup>134</sup> but his reputation is not always a positive one. According to Shilts, the goal of

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<sup>131</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 90.

<sup>132</sup> Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 57-58.

<sup>133</sup> Richard Goldstein, “The Implicated and the Immune”, *Millbank Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (1990): 297.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3350055>

<sup>134</sup> Kramer, *Reports from the holocaust*, xiii.

the GMHC was to provide people with information without acting moralistic, which according to him is what Kramer was doing by “telling people how to have sex,”<sup>135</sup> and David France wrote that “[Kramer] wanted GMHC to assume the role of stern father, telling gay men to stop having sex. The other board members opposed this proposal as being without solid merit medically, and toxic politically.”<sup>136</sup> This is the central plot of *The Normal Heart* and the play’s success has made it a part of Kramer’s legacy. However, according to Kramer, this was not the message he wanted to convey. There is an argument to be made about *the death of the author*, but since Kramer’s reputation is largely due to publications from others, it is only fair to examine both sides. “One peculiar fallout from the play, and from my other political writing, is my being pegged as an advocate of celibacy. I don’t think I’ve ever advocated that, or urged anything but caution. . . Characters in *The Normal Heart* may have said other things.”<sup>137</sup>

Ned Weeks is often read as a representation of Kramer and his beliefs are seen as echoes of those of the writer. Whilst there are similarities between the two – Ned and Kramer both believe that there is more to being gay than promiscuity<sup>138</sup> – Kramer did not mean for Ned to be read as a direct representation of himself. In *Reports from the Holocaust* he reflects on the reception of *The Normal Heart* and the issue of Ned: “What little [criticism] there was came from gay critics who accused me of writing “a self-serving revenge play” against the board of GMHC, making myself the hero. I’m sorry they saw the play so narrowly. I tried to make Ned Weeks as obnoxious as I could. He isn’t my idea of a hero. He fucks up totally. . . I was trying, somehow and again, to atone for my own behaviour. I tried to make Bruce Niles, the Paul Popham character, the sympathetic leader he in fact was.”<sup>139</sup> In regards to his actual

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<sup>135</sup> Shilts, *And The Band Played On*, 310.

<sup>136</sup> France, *How to Survive a Plague*, 53.

<sup>137</sup> Kramer, *Reports from the holocaust*, 94.

<sup>138</sup> Kramer, *Reports from the holocaust*, 94.

<sup>139</sup> Kramer, *Reports from the holocaust*, 93.

beliefs, Kramer says that unlike Ned, he is “not so dumb as to believe that an entire population can stop having sex. Nor do I think it’s healthy for many that they do so.”<sup>140</sup>

Kramer acknowledges that there is a thin line between advocating for caution and celibacy but he makes it clear that whilst he is not a fan of promiscuity, everyone should make their own choices about sex “when he or she is completely informed of all that is known.”<sup>141</sup>

This is the core message of *The Normal Heart* that it is often overlooked. The play is set at a time when there is very little knowledge about AIDS. The exact cause is not known and the only pattern between infections seems to be sexual partners. In an environment like this, warning people about the potential dangers of sexual relationships is a logical step to take since people are not able to make informed decisions about sex if they are not aware of all the risks involved.

However, this message gets buried underneath a mountain of dialogue arguing for abstinence since Emma and Ned are the characters the audience spends the most time with and they have already decided that the risks of promiscuity are not worth it. If there had been a scene in which characters have a discussion about the risks of sexual relations during the AIDS epidemic that ends with them deciding the risks are worth it for them, I think people would have walked away from *The Normal Heart* with an interpretation of Kramer’s beliefs about sexual culture that is more accurate to the reality of his beliefs. Whilst there is no such scene, something similar is implied to have happened between Ned and Felix, which is why it is important to examine Ned’s character not only on his words but by his actions as well.

Ned and Felix are both revealed to have engaged in the promiscuous culture prior to the AIDS epidemic. Scene four reveals that a couple years earlier, Ned and Felix met in the baths and had sex, which Felix remembers but Ned does not.<sup>142</sup> Ned then asks if they could

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<sup>140</sup> Kramer, *Reports from the holocaust*, 94.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Kramer, *The Normal Heart*, 23.

“start over?” and the scene ends. Whilst there is no direct confirmation that Ned and Felix had sex after this, since Felix also listed other activities the two did upon meeting, it can be inferred to have happened from the dialogue in scene eight and ten. When Ned tells Emma about Felix, she gets angry at him for having “taken a lover,” and Ned responds with: “what are we supposed to do – be with nobody ever? Well, it’s not as easy as you might think”<sup>143</sup> If the goal of the play was to advocate for abstinence, then it does not make sense for the so-called hero of the play to have gone against this agenda and confront his fellow advocate in this way. In scene ten, Emma diagnoses Felix with AIDS, which leads him to ask Emma if this means “no more making love?”<sup>144</sup> If they were not having sex, there would be no reason for Felix to ask that question.

The relationship between sex, queer culture, and the AIDS epidemic is a complex topic that Kramer tried to address in *The Normal Heart*, the opening scene of which contains this dialogue:

EMMA. Tell gay men to stop having sex.

NED. It’s a preposterous request.

EMMA. It only sounds harsh. Wait a few more years, it won’t sound so harsh.

NED. Do you realize that you are talking about millions of men who have singled out promiscuity to be their principal political agenda, the one they’d die before abandoning. How do you deal with that?

EMMA. Tell them they may die.

NED. You tell them!

EMMA. Are you saying you guys can’t relate to each other in a non-sexual way?

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<sup>143</sup> Kramer, *The Normal Heart*, 44.

<sup>144</sup> Kramer, *The Normal Heart*, 54.

NED. It's more complicated than that. For a lot of guys it's not easy to meet each other in any other way. It's a way of connecting – which becomes an addiction. And then they're caught in the web of peer pressure to perform and perform. Are you sure this is spread by having sex?<sup>145</sup>

Ned points out that no one is sure how the virus is spread, and that without knowing for certain that sex is part of it he is reluctant to speak out against promiscuity considering its importance for the gay community. In order to understand why promiscuity was so important to gay culture, one has to go back to the 1970s. Shilts writes that “promiscuity . . . was central to the raucous gay movement of the 1970s.”<sup>146</sup> Ned was not a part of this movement but one of the older members of the group, Mickey, was, and he has a very strong reaction to Ned's suggestion that gay men should stop having sex:

MICKEY. I've spent fifteen years of my life fighting for our right to be free and make love whenever, wherever... And you're telling me that all those years of what being gay stood for is wrong... and I'm a murdered. We have been so oppressed! Don't you remember how it was? Can't you see how important it is for us to love openly, without hiding and without guilt? We were a bunch of funny-looking fellows who grew up in sheer misery and one day we fell into the orgy rooms and we thought we'd found heaven. And we would teach the world how wonderful heaven can be. We would lead the way. We would be good for something new.<sup>147</sup>

Mickey's reaction might seem a bit strong but given the context in which this scene takes place, it makes sense for him to be outraged at the implications Ned is making. “The gay community came under attack for the very thing it had fought so hard to legitimate, namely

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<sup>145</sup> Kramer, *The Normal Heart*, 12.

<sup>146</sup> Shilts, *And The Band Played On*, 19.

<sup>147</sup> Kramer, *The Normal Heart*, 62.

its sexuality, and yet again, but now with horrific “evidence,” this sexuality was yokes to a ghastly death.”<sup>148</sup>

Kramer’s play leaves it up to the audience to decide who is right, Ned or Mickey, but if scholars like Warner and Crimp are to be believed, Mickey was the one who as, in hindsight, arguing for the correct approach. Warner states that “one of the most commonly forgotten lessons of AIDS is that this promiscuous intimacy [in gay male culture] turned out to be a lifesaving resource.”<sup>149</sup> Warner agrees with Douglas Crimp on the subject and he cites Crimp’s 1987 article that explains this claim further. Crimp writes that monogamy and abstinence, which religious and conservative institutions often presented as the only moral options, were ineffective since people would give in to their desires regardless of the rules they were taught to follow and avoiding conversations about sex would just result in people having unsafe sex. This is in line with Goldstein’s argument that “safe-sex education has been hampered by religious ideologies.”<sup>150</sup> Crimp goes on to argue that promiscuity is the safer alternative, since it taught “not only the pleasures of sex,” as opposed to the religious notion that sex is for the production of children, “but the great multiplicity of those pleasures.”<sup>151</sup> Promiscuity, according to Crimp and Warner, educated people about the various ways to have sex. This meant that during a time in which penetrative sex could be dangerous, people were educated on way to engage in sexual relationships in a safe manner, which was the better alternative since preaching abstinence had already proven to be ineffective.

Crimp states that the societal narrative about sex as an act that should happen in a monogamous relationship between two *safe partners* rather than an experience to share with any number of people in a *safe way* was “maintaining the us/them dichotomy” that was caused by the way the CDC was classifying risk groups based on sexuality and behaviours

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<sup>148</sup> Frieden, *Telling Time*, 12.

<sup>149</sup> Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 201.

<sup>150</sup> Goldstein, “The Implicated and the Immune”, 315.

<sup>151</sup> Douglas Crimp, “How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic,” *October* 43 (Winter, 1987): 252-253.

such as drug use.<sup>152</sup> This us/them mentality primarily existed in regards to heterosexuals who thought themselves to be safe from AIDS since they saw it as a disease that only gay men and drug users would get, but *Borrowed Time* shows that this mentality also existed within the gay community. For them, the us/them mentality did not stem from prejudice, but from a desire to distance oneself and loved ones from AIDS, which is a big element of *Borrowed Time*: “We wanted to believe the whole deepening tragedy was centred on those at the sexual frontiers who were fucking their brains out. The rest of us were fashioning our own little Puritan forts, as we struggled to convince ourselves that a clean slate would hold the nightmare at bay.”<sup>153</sup>

Analysing the language used in *Borrowed Time* reveals that Monette was aware of the us/them narrative and that it was not a narrative he subscribed to for long. This is due to Monette’s closest friend, Cesar Albini, who started suffering from AIDS in 1983.<sup>154</sup> This exposed Monette to the realities of the illness early on in the epidemic and it made him realise that it was a disease that could affect anyone. The line that best illustrates this change reads: “Cesar wasn’t into anything *weird* – or that’s how I might have put it at that stage of my own denial.”<sup>155</sup> Monette’s personal experience with AIDS, which was only further intensified when Roger got diagnosed, led to him being frustrated with people who believed in the us/them narrative but it also gave him insight as to why people kept trying to maintain this narrative: denial. “The aerobic crowd was playing *us* and *them*. I saw a split develop in gay men around that time [1983], as people fled into themselves.”<sup>156</sup>

This split was also noted by Michael Warner: “Respectable gays like to think that they owe nothing to the sexual subculture they think of as sleazy. But their success, their way of

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<sup>152</sup> Crimp, “How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic,” 253-254. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3397576>

<sup>153</sup> Monette, *Borrowed Time*, 5.

<sup>154</sup> Monette, *Borrowed Time*, 6.

<sup>155</sup> Monette, *Borrowed Time*, 7.

<sup>156</sup> Monette, *Borrowed Time*, 19.

living, their political rights, and their very identities would never have been possible but for the existence of the public sexual culture they now despise. Extinguish it, and almost all *out* gay or queer culture will wither on the vine. No one knows this connection better than the right.”<sup>157</sup> According to John Clum, Paul and Roger would fall into this category of respectable gays. However, Monette’s memoir does not present sexual promiscuity in a negative light. Monette presents it as a part of gay culture that almost everyone partook in and the only negative feelings associated with sexual promiscuity come from Paul’s realisation that unsafe sex is what led to the deaths of many members of his community.

*The Normal Heart* elaborates on the tension resulting from knowing how important promiscuity is to gay culture and wanting to advocate for sexual safety, mainly through the interactions between Ned and Mickey.

MICKEY. Sex is liberating. It’s always guys like you who’ve never had one who are always screaming about relationships, and monogamy and fidelity and holy matrimony. What are [Ned], a closet straight?<sup>158</sup>

The tension between Ned and the other members of GMCH is interesting because Kramer said that one of his goals in writing the play was “to show that these were our fights that kept us diminished and divided.”<sup>159</sup> The confrontations between Ned and the other GMHC members are not meant to be interactions in which the audience takes Ned’s side.

*Angels in America* does not seem to connect with this much but I argue that it does through the character of Roy. Roy embodies conservative right politics more than anyone else in the play, and connecting this to the above statement from Warner would suggest that Roy is aware that the best way to eradicate the gay culture he so despises is to put an end to the public sexual culture. While Roy is openly homophobic and rejects any labels that could

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<sup>157</sup> Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 204.

<sup>158</sup> Kramer, *The Normal Heart*, 29.

<sup>159</sup> Kramer, *Reports from the holocaust* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1994), 93.



attach him to gay culture, he does say the he has sex with men, which means that he is engaging in the public sexual culture. This adds another layer of hypocrisy to Roy, since not only is he hateful towards people who have the same sexual desires as he does, he is engaging in the very thing that is the foundation of the gay community he is so against.

David France reports on a shift that took place in June 1983: “Overnight, in gay neighbourhoods around the country, rubbers took off as fast as Madonna’s debut album . . . They were everywhere. At doctor’s offices, they were given out like lollipops. Jars full of them proliferated at every gay bar and bathhouse.”<sup>160</sup> This is in stark contrast with the time before the AIDS epidemic, when “gay men had as much use for condoms as for tampons.”<sup>161</sup> *Borrowed Time* takes place after this shift but Monette talks about a time before it.

What is now called safe sex did not use to be so clearly defined. The concept didn't exist. But it was quickly becoming apparent, even then, that we couldn't wait for somebody else to define the parameters. Thus every gay man I know has had to come to a point of personal definition by way of avoiding the chaos of sexually transmitted diseases, or STD as we call them in the trade. There was obviously no one moment of conscious decision, a bolt of clarity on the shimmering freeway west of San Bernardino, but I think of that day when I think of the sea change. The party was going to have to stop. The evidence was too ominous: *We were making ourselves sick.*<sup>162</sup> Monette does not write a lot about the attitude towards safe sex later on in his memoir but he does write about the occasional sexual encounter he and his partner had outside of their relationship. Monette’s feelings of guilt surrounding Roger’s AIDS diagnosis, statements such as “I was already riddled with guilt: None of this would be happening if I'd never had

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<sup>160</sup> France, *How to Survive a Plague*, 99.

<sup>161</sup> France, *How to Survive a Plague*, 96.

<sup>162</sup> Monette, *Borrowed Time*, 4.

sex with strangers,”<sup>163</sup> and his speculations about which sexual contact might have caused it suggests that no one in their circle used condoms.

***Angels in America: the intricacies of the American political landscape during the AIDS crisis***

In Tony Kushner's play *Angels in America*, the subtitle "A Gay Fantasia on National Themes" serves as a guide to understanding the complex layers of political, social, and personal interactions that unfold on the stage, as observed by Verna Foster.<sup>164</sup> "Gay" is not merely a reference to the characters' sexual orientation, as it refers to "the political content as well as the camp style of several of its characters."<sup>165</sup> "Fantasia" refers to the play's dramatic structure of a fantasia, which "uses short scenes, dream elements, and characters with typical symbolic names who represent a range of cultural-political positions and are variously paired in parallel and shifting relationships; these characters, usually on stage in duos or trios, engage in discussions that combine wit with biting criticism of contemporary social, political, economic, and sexual mores."<sup>166</sup> The term also references the play's use of dreams and supernatural elements that make the audience question whether what is happening on stage is just part of the characters' imagination. "National Themes" underscores the play's exploration of American politics and society. Foster characterises Kushner as "a socialist dramatist" who utilizes theatre as a platform for reform, addressing urgent issues of the time: "Kushner wrote his play on "National" themes at a time of national crisis about which he felt very strongly: the end of the Reagan era, which Kushner sees as responsible for most of America's ills, especially as they affect gays."<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Monette, *Borrowed Time*, 32.

<sup>164</sup> Verna Foster, "Anxieties and Influences: the presence of Shaw in Kushner's "Angles in America"," *Shaw* 22 (2002): 172. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40681805>

<sup>165</sup> Foster, "Anxieties and Influences," 172.

<sup>166</sup> Foster, "Anxieties and Influences," 171-172.

<sup>167</sup> Foster, "Anxieties and Influences," 174.

The characters in the play embody diverse political and cultural positions, which allows them to engage in conversations that span a wide spectrum of contemporary concerns such as capitalism, religion, issues related to the end of the Cold War, social inequality, and much more.<sup>168</sup> The discussions between the characters reflect the larger debates happening in American society. Kushner also represents a diverse range of gay experiences, from closeted individuals like Roy Cohn and Joe to openly gay figures like Prior and Belize.

### **The complexities of religion**

*Angels in America* shows the impact of religion on personal struggles through the Mormon couple Joe and Harper. Joe struggles with internalised homophobia due to their religion, and his inability to reconcile his sexuality with his religious beliefs drives tensions that lead to tensions in his marriage with Harper. The portrayal of Hannah, Joe's mother, provides a counterpoint to the negative portrayal of religion. Hannah starts out as a traditional Mormon woman but throughout the play she evolves into someone who is able to let go of the negative ideas of the Mormon church. This transformation underscores the notion that it is not solely religious beliefs but individual choices and actions that determine the impact of faith on people's lives. Joe is not a bad guy because of his religion, but because he is a Conservative Republican like Roy.

Prior and Louis both express hatred for the Mormon Church, yet in the epilogue both are seen to be on good terms with Hannah, which shows that the issue is not what people believe but their actions. Hannah is not explicitly shown to reject Mormonism, unlike Joe who takes off his temple garments for Louis, but unlike Hannah, Joe did things that actively harmed the queer community through his work. Hannah is able to see the humanity in Prior

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<sup>168</sup> Foster, "Anxieties and Influences," 175-176.

and the two discuss how their identities should be at odds and recognise the other for who they are. Joe, meanwhile, does not understand that his political identity cannot be reconciled with his sexuality and that there is no separation between who he is publicly and who he wants to be privately.

*Angels in America* criticises institutions such as the LDS Church, the Republican Party, and the Conservative Reagan administration. The play does not criticise prayer or religious traditions, but how people use religion to justify hatred of others.

The angels, actual divine beings, do not hold absolute power. They do not rule people. People have agency and can do with religion what they want. Prior's rejection of his divinely assigned role of the New American Prophet is perhaps the biggest evidence the play gives to show that people are not forced into following a divine plan, it's a choice.

*Borrowed Time* mentions religion as well but the emphasis there is not on religious individuals but on religious leaders and conservatives who see the AIDS crisis as a divine punishment against homosexuals, referencing individuals such as Falwell who saw the AIDS crisis as God's revenge against homosexuals.<sup>169</sup> Monette writes about his "loathing of the holy lies of straight religion as to love,"<sup>170</sup> which is not surprising given that according to those beliefs the love he shares with his partner is wrong. Monette writes: "neither [me nor Roger] could bear the predations of modern religion or the bigotry and smarm of true believers of any stripe. Perhaps we were atheists by default, but the matter of God did not come into the equation of our love."<sup>171</sup> This statement implies that, at least to Monette, it was hard for gay people to believe in a God that was opposed to their love.

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<sup>169</sup> Shilts, *And The Band Played On*, 348.

<sup>170</sup> Monette, *Borrowed Time*, 44.

<sup>171</sup> Monette, *Borrowed Time*, 21.

Monette uses his memoir to draw attention to the large podium that was given to religious leaders and how the attention and status that was given to them allowed for their bigoted views to be spread to mainstream audiences:

“Seven years into the calamity, too many gay men have lost the will to love. The enemies of our people – fundamentalists of every stripe, totalitarians left and right – have all been allowed the full range of their twitching bigotry. Though gay men have begun to understand it is something in themselves these upright men so fear, too many of us have internalized their self-hatred as shame. That the flesh and the spirit are one in love is none of the business of the celibate men of God, especially those who believe they rule the province of love. But the mission of the homophobe is more pernicious even than his morality. He wants every one of us to be all alone, never to find the beloved friend.”<sup>172</sup>

Again, Monette points out that religion has no place in love, but he also points out that the religious fundamentalists use religious doctrine and hateful rethoric to isolate members of the queer community, who did not take their preachings to heart in the way many heterosexual people did. Monette’s writing shows that while many used the AIDS crisis to spread their religious beliefs, it also resulted in many people turning their backs on religion after witnessing the tragedies of the crisis, particularly gay people: “I have come to be more godless than anyone I know after all this meaningless suffering.”<sup>173</sup>

### **Religion in *Angles in America***

In his first scene, Roy says: “I’m not religious but I like God and God likes me”.<sup>174</sup> Later on he repeats his lack of religious affiliation by stating that the only group he belongs to is the

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<sup>172</sup> Monette, *Borrowed Time*, 124-125.

<sup>173</sup> Monette, *Borrowed Time*, 21.

<sup>174</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 15.

law and that “lawyers are the High Priest of America.”<sup>175</sup> However, the play shows that he still has an attachment to his Jewish roots and that he is more religious than he lets on. When Joe is visiting a very sick Roy, Roy asks Joe: “did you get a blessing from your father before he died?.”<sup>176</sup> When Joe replies that his father had not done that, Roy says fathers are supposed to do that and blesses him, thus establishing this mentor-mentee relationship as something akin to a father-son dynamic through religious traditions. The narrative emphasises the religious aspect by having Roy say that unlike the biblical Jacob, who tricked a blessing out of his father, Joe did not have to trick this blessing out of Roy.<sup>177</sup> On his deathbed, Roy ask Belize about the afterlife. Previously it was established that he only shows decency to Belize when he needs something from him and the tone of this scene is civil, which in the interactions between Roy and Belize only occurs when Roy needs something. If he sees a description of the afterlife as valuable, that implies he does ascribe some value to heaven and hell. During his final conversation with Ethel, Roy acknowledges that he is about to die. He envisions going to the afterlife as “the Almighty pats the Sea of Death and lets his Royboy cross over the Jordan”, which is a reference to Mozes.<sup>178</sup>

Belize respects religious traditions and appears to view them as a way to show respect for people, even those who would do not respect others. After Roy Cohn has passed away, Belize has Louis come in to say the Kaddish— a scene that shows that Belize respects people and traditions even when those people have shown little respect for him. At the funeral [he expresses his appreciation for how the service honoured the deceased, while Prior describes the extravagant service as tacky. When Belize describes heaven to Roy he say it is a place where “all the deities are Creole, mulatto, brown as the moth of rivers. Race, taste and history

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<sup>175</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 215.

<sup>176</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 211.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 252.

finally overcome. And you ain't there."<sup>179</sup> Roy initially interprets this as hell. His description is not of the traditional image of Heaven but of a utopia. He envisions an afterlife where race or class no longer matter. Religion does not have this same idea of equality: in religion people who are different get punished. Religions strive to create a world in the image of their faith, but in order to achieve a world like the afterlife envisioned by Belize we need to let go of religious doctrine and respect people for who they are. He only says Roy does not belong in this Heaven – the only basis of this is the treatment Roy has given other people and his exclusionary and discriminatory ideas.

Louis is Jewish but the play shows him to be more interested in grand ideas than religion. He often contemplates the state of the world but when he does this he does not use religion as a frame of reference, and he describes himself as “an intensely secular Jew”.<sup>180</sup> This, combined with him not knowing the words to the Kaddish, shows that Louis, while he might still identify as Jewish, does so more out of a sense of heritage rather than faith. When Louis finds out Joe is Mormon, he asks Joe: “how can a fundamentalist theocratic religion function participatorily in a pluralist secular democracy?”<sup>181</sup> To Louis, it is impossible to reconcile religion with the society in which they live, and he has developed his own philosophical ideas about how the world works. He is also shown to have an issue with how religions look at life. Through Joe, Kushner shows someone who lives his life burdened with the ideas of sin and salvation, which is a way of life Louis is against: “it should be the questions and shape of a life, its total complexity gathered, arranged and considered, which matters in the end, not some stamp of salvation or damnation which disperses all the complexity in some unsatisfying little condition”.<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 223.

<sup>180</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 266.

<sup>181</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 194.

<sup>182</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 39.

The scene in which Louis struggles to recite the Kaddish marks a moment in the play in which the lines between reality and imagination are blurred. Ethel, who thus far has only presented as a figment of Roy's imagination, helps Louis find the words to the prayer.

Although she remains invisible to everyone but Roy, she has a real effect on Louis, who describes the experience as miraculous. Her appearance in this scene gives further credence to the Angel being more than an hallucination by Prior as Belize suspects.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, informally known as the LDS or Mormon Church, is a religion that derives from Christianity.<sup>183</sup> The LDS Church believes that people are eternal spirits: they exist before they are born and they continue to exist after death. The time spent on earth is a period during which this spirit is tested in order to determine if the afterlife this spirit will go to will be one of punishment or reward.<sup>184</sup>

Cragun, Sumerau, and Williams examined the way LDS leaders spoke about homosexuality over time and they observed that “within this stratified view of eternal experience, the most faithful Mormons are those who form heterosexual relationships that produce biological children, and abstain from all sexual congress beyond the confines of heterosexual marriage” and that queer Mormons “face significant conflict when attempting to integrate their seemingly disparate religious and sexual identities”.<sup>185</sup> Their 2015 study found that between the 1950s and 1990s, LDS leaders saw homosexuality as “a problem foretelling the ultimate destruction of American society . . . beginning in the 1970s and continuing through present time, LDS elites defined homosexuality as a problem that could lead to the

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<sup>183</sup> “Are “Mormons” Christian?,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed April 12, 2023, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/christians?lang=eng>.

<sup>184</sup> Cragun, Sumerau, and Williams, "From Sodomy to Sympathy: LDS Elites' Discursive Construction of Homosexuality Over Time." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 54, no. 2 (May 2015): 292.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/24644342>

<sup>185</sup> Cragun, Sumerau, and Williams, “From Sodomy to Sympathy,” 292.



destruction of the family [and] a contradiction of divinely inspired gender roles”.<sup>186</sup> They noted that the LDS Church has adopted a more sympathetic approach to homosexuality since the late 1980s, which was when Church leaders started “separating the act (homosexual practice) from the person (homosexual desire)”.<sup>187</sup> The Church remains of the opinion that homosexuality is “an affliction that can be overcome by love of God and other members of the church”.<sup>188</sup> Members are encouraged to sympathise with “good people struggling with homosexual desires”<sup>189</sup> and the Church criticizes those who fail to or are unwilling to change. Cragun, Sumerau, and Williams conclude that “while [LDS leaders] could have crafted a more sexually inclusive version of Mormonism, they ultimately chose to resist the changes taking place in mainstream American society”.<sup>190</sup>

*Angels in America* rejects this opposition of an inclusive society, as observed by Hutchison-Jones: “Kushner demands that his characters reject the rigid conservatism of the contemporary Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Reagan-era Republican politics to rebuild the nation on liberal progressive values, the only values that Kushner believes can create a sustainable American community that will survive the violence of history”.<sup>191</sup> Hutchison-Jones also notes that many scholars have paid little attention to Mormonism in the play, with Mormon scholars being the exception, and writes: “Kushner portrays three Mormon characters whose struggles with their sexual identity, love, politics, and religion are central to his larger vision”.<sup>192</sup> What is interesting to note is that none of the Mormons in the play behave like Mormons should.

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<sup>186</sup> Cragun, Sumerau, and Williams, “From Sodomy to Sympathy,” 296.

<sup>187</sup> Cragun, Sumerau, and Williams, “From Sodomy to Sympathy,” 303.

<sup>188</sup> Cragun, Sumerau, and Williams, “From Sodomy to Sympathy,” 304-305.

<sup>189</sup> Cragun, Sumerau, and Williams, “From Sodomy to Sympathy,” 306.

<sup>190</sup> Cragun, Sumerau, and Williams, “From Sodomy to Sympathy,” 305.

<sup>191</sup> Christine Hutchison-Jones, “Center and Periphery: Mormons and American Culture in Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*,” in *Peculiar Portrayals: Mormons on the Page, Stage and Screen*, (University Press of Colorado, 2002 ): 26. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt4cgr9g.4>.

<sup>192</sup> Hutchison-Jones, “Center and Periphery,” 5.

Harper is initially depicted as somewhat crazy, but throughout the play it is revealed to the audience that her dreams are not that different from Prior's and she becomes one of the most insightful character in the play. Harper is used to show the flaws of the Mormon faith. Like with Hannah, this is primarily shown through her interactions with Prior. When Harper describes herself to Prior she says that she is a "Jack Mormon. It means I'm flawed, inferior Mormon product".<sup>193</sup> Harper is very aware of the expectations placed upon her by her faith and the ways in which she is not living up to them. When she is in the Diorama Room with Prior she draws attention to the sexism in the Mormon Church by pointing out how the men are the only ones who move and speak in the diorama showing Mormon history while the women are passive observers who are unable to take action. Harper defies the expectations placed upon her as a Mormon wife by leaving Joe at the end and effectively divorcing him.

When Prior mentions her addiction to Valium in their first meeting, Harper says: "I'm not *addicted*. I don't believe in addiction . . . I *never* take drugs . . . Except Valium . . . It's terrible. Mormons are not supposed to be addicted to anything. I'm a Mormon".<sup>194</sup> This is a parallel to Joe, who for the majority of his life tried to deny his homosexuality. Earlier in this scene, Harper said: "in my church we don't believe in homosexuals".<sup>195</sup> The church not believing in addiction does not change that Harper is an addict, and likewise, the lack of belief in homosexuality will not change that Joe is a homosexual. This scene also highlights the prejudices Harper has been raised with as she struggles to reconcile with Joe, "a very normal man",<sup>196</sup> being gay.

The play shows that Harper's feeling about homosexuality are not due to her being homophobic. Her initial conversation with Prior ends with her saying: "deep inside you,

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<sup>193</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 190.

<sup>194</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 32.

<sup>195</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 32.

<sup>196</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 34.

there's a part of you, the most inner part, entirely free of disease. I can see that".<sup>197</sup> She not once suggests that he should be trying to change his sexual orientation. The same thing happens in her conversations with Joe. She expresses anger and resentment towards him, but this seems to be based on the way he treats her and the state of their marriage rather than her blaming him for his attraction to men. After Prior has revealed to her that Joe is gay, she tells Joe: "it was wrong of me to marry you. I knew you – It's a sin, and it's killing us both".<sup>198</sup> In the context of the scene, the sin that is referred to is implied to be the overall state of their marriage rather than just Joe's sexuality. Their marriage is a very unhealthy one and both are deeply unhappy, and they entered their marriage knowing they would make each other unhappy.

One of the main elements of the play is Joe's struggle to accept his sexuality. He shows a lot of internalised homophobia due to his Mormonism. When Harper confronts him about his sexuality, he gets angry at her for trying to make him admit to being gay:

Does it make any difference? That I might be one thing deep within, no matter how wrong or ugly that thing is, so long as I have fought, with everything I have, to kill it . . . What do you want from me, Harper? More than that? For God's sake, there is nothing left, I'm a shell. There is nothing left to kill. As long as my behaviour is what I know it has to be. Decent. Correct. That alone in the eyes of God . . . All I will say is that I am a very good man who has worked very hard to become someone good and you want me to destroy that.<sup>199</sup>

He has internalised the idea that people should be able to change who they are if they try and he resents himself for not being able to change. He later shows that he is aware of the flaws in this way of thinking by saying: "you feel that the blemishes are yours by choice, which of course they aren't".<sup>200</sup> This statement is followed by a scene that intercuts between

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 37.

<sup>199</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 40-41.

<sup>200</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 56.

Joe, who is in a bar with Roy, and Louis, who is propositioning a man in Central Park. This cut from Roy telling Joe he should pursue his own wants and needs to Louis telling the man he wants to have sex with him implies that what Joe really wants is to be with a man, or at least to be like Louis, someone who knows what he wants and who acts on those desires. In *Perestroika* he reflects on his life and he tells his mother: “nothing works. Not all my . . . my effortful clinging to the good, to what’s right, not pursuing . . . freedom, or happiness. Nothing, nothing works anymore, nothing I try fixes anything at all”.<sup>201</sup> During his final scene with Harper in *Millennium Approaches*, Joe goes against the LDS’s beliefs about homosexuality: “I thought maybe that with enough effort and will I could change myself . . . but I can’t . . .”<sup>202</sup>

When Joe finally comes to terms with his sexuality, he still struggles with the LDS’s attitude towards homosexuality. This is shown through him saying “I am going to Hell for doing this”<sup>203</sup> and “I keep expecting Divine Retribution for this”<sup>204</sup> in reference to acting on his attraction to Louis. When his relationship with Louis starts to fall apart, Joe takes off his temple garments, a gesture that implies his willingness to abandon his faith for Louis. This is later shown to be an act of desperation rather than a genuine expression of Joe wanting to distance himself from Mormonism. When Louis leaves him, Joe goes back to Harper, which is possible since the Mormon religion dictates that marriages are between spirits and therefore eternal in the eyes of the faith. However, Harper has distanced herself from Mormonism and she leaves him.

Joe’s fate remains ambiguous since he and Harper are the only character, aside from the deceased Roy, who do not feature in the epilogue. It is unknown what Joe’s relationship with his mother looks like, but considering her role in the new family [community formation] that he does not belong to, their relationship is implied to not be great.

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<sup>201</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 231.

<sup>202</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 80.

<sup>203</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 123.

<sup>204</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 201.

Hannah starts as a typical Mormon mother who emphasises the importance of faith and hard work in order to deal with the hardships of life.<sup>205</sup> Her faith determines how she reacts to Joe coming out to her. During their phone call, Hannah acknowledges his sin of drinking, “drinking is a sin! I raised you better than that”,<sup>206</sup> but she cannot bring herself to acknowledge his homosexuality and insists they pretend the conversation never happened. Hannah is not able to acknowledge or admit Joe’s sexuality in a way that is reminiscent of Joe’s earlier conversations with Harper.

When Hannah sees Joe in New York she suggests they pray together, echoing the LDS’s belief that prayer and community love can help people overcome their struggles with same sex attraction, but Joe, who has finally come to terms with his sexuality, gets angry at her for suggesting it: “PRAY TOGHETER?! No. I couldn’t...stomach the prospect!”<sup>207</sup> This is the last scene the two share together and their relationship going forward remains unknown. Shortly after this exchange, Hannah meets Prior. He is the first openly gay man she meets, and unlike with Joe, she does not have any preconceived notions about who he is, and the two develop an unlikely friendship throughout the last two acts of *Perestroika*. Hannah helps him when he falls ill and stays with him at the hospital. Her religion, which should be a cause of conflict between the two, enables her to be a comforting presence to Prior, who has started to fear he is going mad. She reassures him that angelic visions do not make someone crazy and tells him that “one hundred and seventy years ago . . . an angel of God appeared to Joseph Smith”,<sup>208</sup> the Mormon prophet, and when Prior expresses his desire to refuse his visions, Hannah tells him that there is scriptural precedent for it, and tells him that “an angel is a

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<sup>205</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 180.

<sup>206</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 79.

<sup>207</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 233.

<sup>208</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 239.

belief. With wings and arms that can carry you. It if lets you down, reject it”<sup>209</sup>, which is surprising for someone whose religion is based on principles of eternity. Prior initially feels conflicted about Hannah’s Mormonism but the two come to an understanding:

PRIOR. I’m sorry but it’s repellent to me. So much of what you believe.

HANNAH. What do I believe?

PRIOR. I am a homosexual. With AIDS. I can just imagine what you -

HANNAH. No you can’t. Imagine. The things in my head. You don’t make assumptions about me, mister; I won’t make them about you.

PRIOR. Fair enough.<sup>210</sup>

Their interactions show that people are capable of being kind to one another despite their differences by judging someone based on their actions rather than their identity. This sentiment is repeated when Prior shows Hannah the lesions on his skin, something which he describes as inhuman, but Hannah tells him “it’s a cancer. Nothing more. Nothing more human than that”.<sup>211</sup>

The epilogue describes Hannah as having changed. She looks more like New Yorker and she is part of the found family of gay men, which suggests she has let go of her faith to some extent and that she has adopted more liberal ideas considering she has been with them for four years. This change in Hannah, which could be explained due to her getting to know Prior. Hutchison-Jones writes on this change in Hannah: “not family, nor ethnicity, nor religion determines human interactions in the glimpse of the ideal that Kushner gives in the play’s epilogue. Now acceptance, not just tolerance, is the only legitimate principle guiding human behaviour”.<sup>212</sup> There is also the implication that Hannah might not be heterosexual. When she tells Prior about how she reacted when Joe came out to her, she expresses that she

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<sup>209</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 242.

<sup>210</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 240.

<sup>211</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 241.

<sup>212</sup> Hutchison-Jones, “Center and Periphery,” 7.

has come to realise homosexuality does not bother her: “Homosexuality. I don’t find it an appetizing notion, two men, together, but men in *any* configuration...”.<sup>213</sup> This suggests that Hannah might not be attracted to men. Her sexuality is complicated further when the angel kisses her and Hannah is described in the notes as feeling “immense unfamiliar desire and fear”<sup>214</sup> for the Angel – although it was noted in the interaction between Prior and the Angels that “the sexual politics of [the Angel] are very confusing”.<sup>215</sup>

Prior is the New Prophet, but his role as a prophet shows the fallibility of religious doctrine and he undermines the authority of the Angels. Prior does not know a lot about religion when compared to the other character. Hannah has to point out the similarities between his situation and that of Joseph Smith. Furthermore, she has to tell him about scriptural precedent for prophets who deny their visions, even though the Angel already told him about such prophets and even compared him to one by saying: “you can’t Outrun your Occupation Jonah”<sup>216</sup> during their first meeting, but Prior did not understand the meaning of this statement. Hutchison-Jones observed that Prior Walter “is the only white Anglo-Saxon Protestant in the play” and that “though he does not accept every religious idea presented to him, most notably the conservative proscriptions of the Angel, he does not have to overcome strong, inherited religious ideas to assimilate new ones”.<sup>217</sup> Throughout the play, Prior struggles to understand the visitation from the Angel and he refuses to accept the visions she shows him: “that was terrible! I don’t want to see that!”<sup>218</sup>. This is not the behaviour one would expect from the New Prophet. The first meeting between Prior and the Angel shows the fallibility of the Angels and their vision:

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<sup>213</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 240.

<sup>214</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 261.

<sup>215</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 165.

<sup>216</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 173.

<sup>217</sup> Hutchison-Jones, “Center and Periphery,” 7.

<sup>218</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 163.

ANGEL. Remove from their hiding place the Sacred Prophetic Implements. Your dreams have revealed them to you.

PRIOR. What dreams?

ANGEL. You have had dreams revealing to you-

PRIOR. I haven't had a dream I can remember in months.

ANGEL. No . . . *dreams*, you— Are you sure?<sup>219</sup>

If the Angels' vision is true and Prior is made part of a divine plan, then it does not make sense for him to deviate from the scripture. This point is emphasised when the Angel, upon realising Prior truly has no idea what she is talking about, removes the implements from their hiding place herself and draws attention to how this is different from what was foretold:

ANGEL. And Lo, the Prophet was led by his nightly dreams to the hiding place of the Sacred Implements, and – Revision in the text: the Angel helped him to unearth them, for he was weak of body . . . though not of will.<sup>220</sup>

When Prior tries to embrace his role as prophet, he dresses in an outfit which he describes as looking like “the Wrath of God”.<sup>221</sup> It is interesting that Prior, one of the two characters in the play with AIDS, uses this description for himself. For religious fundamentalists like Jerry Falwell, who was “bellowing about AIDS and God’s wrath”,<sup>222</sup> and politicians that aligned themselves with him, AIDS proved the existence of a moral order and it acted as an “appropriate punishment for violating it”.<sup>223</sup> Prior describing himself as such reclaims power over these words, especially since Prior is well aware of the fact that some people see AIDS as a punishment from God. Prior, like some gay people at the time,<sup>224</sup> wonders as much.

When the Angel tells him humans and their mingling drove God out of heaven, he asks her:

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<sup>219</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 161.

<sup>220</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 162.

<sup>221</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 158.

<sup>222</sup> Shilts, *And The Band Played On*, 348.

<sup>223</sup> Houser, *Ecosickness*, 40.

<sup>224</sup> Shilts, *And The Band Played On*, 348.



“Is this, disease, the virus in me, is that the, the epistle, is that the prophecy? Is this just ... revenge, because we, because you think we ruined . . .”<sup>225</sup> Later, he says: “maybe I’m a prophet. Not me, alone, all of us, the, the ones who’re dying now. Maybe the virus is the prophecy? Be still. Maybe the world has driven God from Heaven. Because, because I do believe that, over and over, I’ve seen the end of things”.<sup>226</sup> Prior ultimately reject this interpretation, but him thinking like this can be attributed to him doubting whether the Angel is real or whether this is part of AIDS related dementia or madness as a result of his situation, as is suggested by Belize.<sup>227</sup> At the end of their first meeting, the Angel told Prior: “on your blood we have written: STASIS! The END”.<sup>228</sup> This links the Angels making Prior a prophet against human progress to him having AIDS since the HIV virus attacks the white blood cells, which puts a stop to the body’s ability to effectively fight infections and this was the beginning of the end for patients since there was no proper treatment available at the time. Prior eventually asks the Angels to put an end to the AIDS epidemic:

PRIOR. This plague, it should stop. In me and everywhere. Make it go away.

AUSTRALIA. Oh We have tried. WE suffer with You but We do not know. We Do not know How.<sup>229</sup>

This shows that the AIDS crisis is too complex for the Angels to fix, implying that humanity will have to try. More so, it shows that if the Angels could have ended it, they would have, which goes against the idea that the AIDS crisis is a divine punishment. This echoes arguments used by religious people who disagreed with people like Falwell, such as Garry Walsh, who declared: “My God is not a vengeful God [...] When those children died of polio

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<sup>225</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 173.

<sup>226</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 176.

<sup>227</sup> Hutchison-Jones, “Center and Periphery,” 13.

<sup>228</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 174.

<sup>229</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 276.

in the fifties, they were not punished by God. One of the most perverted uses of religion is to use religion to justify hatred for your fellowmen”<sup>230</sup>.

Once Hannah has reassured him that he is not going mad, Prior is able to formally reject his role as prophet. He wrestles with the angel in a scene that resembles the biblical Jacob, and Prior tells the Angel: “take back...your Book. Anti-Migration, that’s...so...*feeble*, I can’t believe...you couldn’t do better than that”.<sup>231</sup> Prior wins his fight with the Angel, further shifting the power dynamic between the two, and Prior Walter becomes the spokesperson for human temporality as it exists in contrast to the Angels’ idea of stasis and immobility.<sup>232</sup>

In the epilogue, Prior addresses the audience directly. This is the first and only time this happens in the play, and it happening shortly after Prior received a blessing from the Angels gives it a supernatural feeling.

The Angels, whilst presented as powerful being, are not absolute since Prior is able to undermine their power. The Angels also show the hypocrisy present in a lot of institutions. They use a Radio, “which they are not supposed to be using”<sup>233</sup> to listen to the future and they are “working [and] making progress”<sup>234</sup>, which is what they want humans to stop doing. The Angels making a revision to the text in her first meeting with Prior suggests that the Angels do not have absolute knowledge, otherwise there would have been no need for a retroactive revision of the text. This happens again when Prior rejects his visions and makes the Angel appear: “I Have Returned, Prophet, And not according to Plan.”<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> Shilts, *And The Band Played On*, 347.

<sup>231</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 259.

<sup>232</sup> David Savran, “Ambivalence, Utopia, and a Queer Sort of Materialism,” *Theatre Journal* 47, no. 2 (May, 1995): 214. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3208484>

<sup>233</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 272.

<sup>234</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 275.

<sup>235</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 258.

The Angels have a complicated relationship with God, who abandoned them. There are two instances in the play where a voices speak to Prior. The first in the Angel before their meeting, who tells Prior: “prepare for the parting of the air. The breath, the ascent. Glory to...”.<sup>236</sup> The second time Prior’s ancestors, who the Angel refers to as ‘the heralds’, tell him: “prepare, the infinite descent, a breath, a feather, glory to- ”.<sup>237</sup> The dialogue here is cut off before the word God, which would usually be there, which implies that, to the Angels, there is no glory to God, or that the glory should befall someone else.

PRIOR. You should *sue* the bastard. That’s my only contribution to all this *Theology*.

Sue the bastard for walking out. How dare he. He oughta pay

ANGEL. Thus spake the Prophet.<sup>238</sup>

The Angles also contrast with religious ideas about gender and monogamy. The angels are describes as being “hermaphroditically equipped”,<sup>239</sup> and Angelic copulation with God, whose gender “is a male Hebrew letter”,<sup>240</sup> is the engine behind all creation. Heaven is described as a city resembling San Francisco, particularly post the 1906 earthquake, but it is interesting that it is compared with a city so well known for its gay community. Whereas religions like Mormonism describe male and female as important for the divine design, the Angels says that “when God made people He created division”,<sup>241</sup> particularly by making them uni-genitalled and giving them the potential for change.

### **The conservatism of the angels**

The angels in themselves serve as allegorical embodiments of conservatism. They deliver a stern message, advocating for a halt to human intermingling, which they deem responsible for

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<sup>236</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 66.

<sup>237</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 93.

<sup>238</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 276.

<sup>239</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 165.

<sup>240</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 166.

<sup>241</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 168.

driving God away and dooming the world to become unliveable. This perspective is reminiscent of the social conservatism that disapproved of the sexual promiscuity prevalent in gay culture during that era. The angels' aversion to intermingling can be interpreted as a rejection of ethical non-monogamy and sexual freedom, which were prominent features of the gay community and which rreligious fundamentalists and the conservative movement viewed these aspects as the downfall of American society. In this light, the angels' proclamation of impending doom echoes the concerns of conservative voices, and just like the world had not yet fallen into chaos and disrepair because of queer cultures, neither has the apocalypse the angels so feared come about.

However, it's important to note that the rejection of sexual liberation was not confined to traditional conservatives alone. Larry Kramer, a prominent queer rights activist, advocated for a temporary stop of promiscuous behaviours during the early days of the AIDS epidemic. This shows that not all those opposing sexual freedom were strictly conservative, however it is important to note that the motivation behind their arguments against promiscuity is vastly different. Kramer argued for caution at a time when people were only just starting to realise that AIDS was linked to sexual intercourse while the conservatives were against the very concept of promiscuity. Yet both sides were arguing for the same thing, which might explain why Kramer's pleas were ignored: the homosexual community had long been criticized for their promiscuity and at a time when stigmatization of homosexuality was increasing, one of their own was seemingly taking on the ideas of the conservatives.

*Angels in America* captures the deep-seated differences between liberal and conservative worldviews through debates and dialogues. Louis and Joe epitomize this divide. Louis is a proud gay liberal who cannot remember the words to a prayer and who sees the Republican party as "a political party that's one half religious-zealot-control-freak theocrats

and one half ego-anarchist-libertarian cowboys,”<sup>242</sup> Joe is a closeted Mormon who votes for the Republican party. Louis and Joe’s primary conflict throughout the play stems from their different opinions about Ronald Reagan:

LOUIS. *And conservative!* Though if you were gorgeous and your politics didn’t horrifically suck I’d really be in trouble here, but yes, I do sort of wish you weren’t responsible for everything bad and evil in the world

JOE. You give me way too much credit.

LOUIS. Right, I mean, Reagan deserves his fair share.

JOE. You’re obsessed, you know that? If people like you didn’t have President Reagan to demonize, where would you be?

LOUIS. If he didn’t have people like me to demonize where would *he* be? Upper-right-hand square on *The Hollywood Squares*.<sup>243</sup>

Louis attributes Reagan's success to his demonization of homosexuals, while Joe maintains that the left blames Reagan for all of their problems. Their perspectives are shaped by their lived experiences. At the time this conversation takes place, Joe has only struggled with the internalised issues surrounding his sexuality, whereas Louis, an openly gay man, is more aware of the real life consequences right wing political ideologies have on the queer community. At the end of the play it is revealed that Joe took part in legislations that harmed queer people, which shows that he is not unaware of what is happening, but unlike Louis he has not yet been in a position where he is able to witness the consequences of these legislations first hand due to his social and religious environment at the beginning of the play.

Another interesting perspective on the tensions between the homosexual community and the Republican government comes from Roy Cohn. Michael Warner writes about the

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<sup>242</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 195.

<sup>243</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 203-204.

importance of self-unity in relation to Western politics. “The republican notion of virtue, for example, was designed exactly to avoid any rupture of self-difference between ordinary life and publicity. The republican was to be the same as citizen and as man. He was to maintain continuity of value, judgment, and reputation from a domestic economy to affairs of a public nature.”<sup>244</sup> Although Warner is referring to eighteenth century republicanism here, these observations are applicable to the characters of Joe and Roy. Roy is a man obsessed with his public image and to him, his public and private life are the same. He cannot admit being a homosexual AIDS patient to his doctor since that would make him something he, in his view, is not. Joe, the other Republican in the play, is a man who does try to put a distance between his private and public life, but this ultimately fails because of his political beliefs and his actions as a chief clerk. Within Kushner’s play, the Republican supporters are not able to distance their public and private identity, since their actions in public define who they are in private.

### **Critique against the depiction of AIDS in plays**

In her critical analysis, Sarah Schulman highlights the misrepresentation and misinterpretation of the AIDS crisis in prominent works such as *Angels in America* and *The Normal Heart*. She contends that these works, while lauded by mainstream audiences, fail to accurately depict the reality of the crisis. Schulman asserts that *Angels in America* presents a skewed view of the AIDS crisis by positioning straight individuals as “the heroes of the crisis” while neglecting the vital roles played by the queer community and activists,<sup>245</sup> and she praises *The Normal Heart* for its protagonists, since “the story of a group of white gay

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<sup>244</sup> Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 160.

<sup>245</sup> Schulman, *Let The Record Show*, xx.

men heroically battling the government, differs because it did represent an accurate paradigm.”<sup>246</sup>

Schulman points out that *Angels in America* and many other plays of the time “show alone and abandoned gay men with AIDS, contrasted with a homophobic straight person who heroically overcomes their prejudices to support the poor gay man who has no community and no political movement to protect him. Of course, the opposite was true: gay men with AIDS were abandoned by most straight people, including their families, neighbours, and government. And they were defended by their community who often shared their lack of rights and representation.”<sup>247</sup> While she is making a good point, I do not agree with her interpretation of *Angels in America*. Prior is indeed abandoned by his lover but he still has his friend Belize, who expresses resentment and hatred towards Louis for abandoning Prior. Furthermore, Belize is the embodiment of the queer community supporting one another. He is not only supportive of his friends but he also helps Roy out of a sense of queer solidarity. According to Schulman’s interpretation, Hannah would be the homophobic straight person who overcomes prejudice and saves the gay character. The issue with this is that Hannah is not portrayed as being homophobic. Her initial reaction to her son coming out to her was not great, but she later establishes that she has nothing against gay people, and so her reaction to Joe’s admission can be attributed to other factors, such as her being caught off guard or her being angry about his drinking. Regarding her relationship with Prior, Hannah’s religion – which should be a source of conflict between the two – is ironically what helps Prior to reject his vision. While she was able to help Prior stand up the angels and reject his status as prophet, being a prophet was not what was killing him, AIDS was. Therefore, Hannah is not saving him in any significant way. If anyone saves him, as Schulman implies happened

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<sup>246</sup> Schulman, *Let The Record Show*, xx.

<sup>247</sup> Schulman, *Let The Record Show*, xx.

because of Prior gaining access to AZT, it is Belize with the help of Louis. The play is not about overcoming homophobia. While Hannah is there at the end, she recognised homosexuality does not bother her and the hope at the end stems from there being a found family. A community.

Furthermore, the contrasts in the plays are Louis-Joe, both of whom run from their situation but one of whom realises the error of his ways and is able to return to some extent while the other does not see the error. Belize-Roy, an openly gay man who recognises the importance of people and a closeted gay and a self-centred bigot. Hannah is not a mirror to Prior. They bond over religion, but if anyone is a contrast to Prior it is Harper, who is also a wronged spouse who makes a decision to reject her partner ones he comes crawling back to her. Both are also prophets of different sorts.

Another element Schulman draws attention to is the way *Angels in America* represents AZT. She points out that *Angels in America* ends with a sense of hope tied to AZT, despite the drug's potential harm and limitations and she criticizes the play for not addressing the contradictory aspects of AZT's effectiveness. However, is trying to point out the contradictions in the play, Schulman ends up contradicting herself.

Schulman talks about a 1993 study that showed that the drug AZT was actually harmful to AIDS patients and that it was not the life-saving medication people had hoped for. She recalls how activists groups such as ACT up has long before pushed for more studies into treatments. On how this could have been used in *Angels in America* she says: “So, for example, the hero of *Angels in America*, Prior, might have actually died *because* he took AZT, instead of the implication that his life may have been saved by it.”<sup>248</sup> Earlier in her book she wrote: “at the end of *Angels in America*, Roy Cohn has died of AIDS, and his nurse, Belize, steals the remaining doses of AZT for this friend Prior, hoping to save his life. It is a

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<sup>248</sup> Schulman, *Let The Record Show*, 431.



weird moment. First of all, if AZT worked so well, then why did Roy die? This is a leap of logic that the play doesn't address."<sup>249</sup> This is a contradiction of her statement that the play implies the drug will save Prior's life. While there is a message of hope, in that Prior, a man with far less resources than Roy is now able to get a treatment otherwise unavailable to him, Roy's death leaves the audience with a sense of dread. The medicine is not a guarantee that Prior will live, as Roy died.

Schulman continues her discussion of the harmful representation of AZT as a life-saving medication by drawing attention to the commercial aspects of healthcare: "those of us in ACT UP already knew that the greedy pharmaceutical company Burroughs Wellcome was not going to save lives. But for the general theatregoing, *New York Times*-reading public, well, they had no idea. As hard as we tried, the story just wasn't being accurately told or reported. . . . As the curtain fell, only some people in the audience actually knew AZT was not the answer, because they already has this information because they took their seats."<sup>250</sup> The play does end with a message of hope, but I would argue that the positive ending comes primarily from everyone coming together in the end and their being a community. There is not mention of the treatment Prior is on in the epilogue. Furthermore, Belize was the one who told Roy about the drug trial and warned him about the double-blind study. There is no doubt in my mind that the second reports about AZT being harmful came out, Belize would have told Prior about it and tried to get him a different treatment. Prior received a blessing from the angels at the end, and while they are established as not being able to end the AIDS epidemic or cure the disease, it remains unknown what their blessing did. It is possible that it contributed to Prior still being alive in 1990. One could also make an argument for dramatic irony. Those familiar with AIDS patients and queer activism would have known that the hope

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<sup>249</sup> Schulman, *Let The Record Show*, 423.

<sup>250</sup> Schulman, *Let The Record Show*, 423.

the characters have about AZT is misplaced. This literary device is used throughout the play. The audience knows Roy's blood is dangerous to Joe, Joe does not. The audience is aware of relationships and details that the characters do not find out until much later and once they do it changed their dynamics.

## Conclusion

The three works discussed here discuss various dominant social narratives and subvert and expose them in different ways. By shedding a light on how the societal narratives about the queer community and the AIDS crisis are not reflective of the lived experiences of people within these communities and providing their own side of the story, Monette, Kushner and Kramer are able to reclaim power over the narrative surrounding AIDS. They do not shy away from the more problematic aspects of the queer experience, such as the conflicts that arose from the different attitudes towards promiscuity and the divide this created within the community. They acknowledge that they are not perfect and yet the authors all show the sense of unity that was felt among those trying to fight against not only the AIDS epidemic itself but the institutions that wanted to silence them.

At the end of his book, Plummer writes about narrative hope, which exists on the line between optimism and misery, and which is presented as a way to engage with narratives that acknowledges both the good and bad parts of the human experience. “Narrative hope has to be perpetually and fully aware of the atrocities that humanity has committed in the past and present (and, sadly, may well continue into a future); it does see the need for persistent critique and radical change. But it also knows that there has also always been a long alternative real history of the positive and the good.”<sup>251</sup> Despite the heavy subject material, all three works I have analysed carry this message of narrative hope. *Angels in America* is the most obvious example. Roy and Joe did awful things and they are not offered a redemption at the end, and whilst Louis is allowed to be a part of Prior’s life he is not forgiven for leaving his sick partner. The narrative acknowledges the past wrongs and it illustrates that some people are truly irredeemable but it does not end on a sombre note. By including Hannah in the found-family at the end it shows that people are capable of change and by having Prior be

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<sup>251</sup> Plummer, *Narrative Power*, 150.

alive despite his illness, the audience is given the impression of a better future. *The Normal Heart* ends with the death of Felix but the same scene includes a wedding for him and Ned, which results in the saddest scene of the play focussing on the good and the future. *Borrowed Time*, by virtue of being an account of Roger's final months, is not given the same narrative liberties in terms of structure as it had to end with Roger's death. However, the message of hope persists: Paul has a family and a community and the loss of his partner has only motivated him more to keep fighting for justice.

The AIDS epidemic exposed the vulnerabilities of a marginalized community, and in response to this many authors used their platform and voice to reclaim power over the narrative. They were not content to let the dominant social narrative be the only one and through their own stories the gay community was able to not only share their experiences, but they were able to create a powerful opposition to the narrative the conservative politicians of the time were spreading.

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