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FROM MONSTERS TO MEN

AFFECTIVE REPRESENTATIONS IN HIV/AIDS VISUAL
NARRATIVES AND THE EXPERIENCE OF CITIZENSHIP

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RESUMO

De Monstros a Homens: Representações afetivas em narrativas visuais do HIV/SIDA e a experiência de cidadania

Esta tese tem como objeto de análise as representações de afeto e emoção em narrativas visuais homoafetivas que retratam a epidemia do HIV/SIDA da década de 1980, nos Estados Unidos da América, proporcionando ao público representações de intimidade num cenário de crise. Os objetos culturais em questão são *Angels in America* (2003), realizado por Mike Nichols, e *The Normal Heart* (2014), realizado por Ryan Murphy.

Embora este trabalho se foque nas representações de afeto e amor em narrativas *queer*, a abordagem não terá por base a perspectiva da teoria *queer* (embora seja inevitavelmente mencionada); em termos de metodologia, a base da minha abordagem é a teoria do afeto nos estudos culturais, literários e fílmicos. As representações de amor, fragilidade e intimidade ao serem afetadas pela doença tendem a ter um apelo maior quando envolvem afetos considerados profundamente humanos. Em causa está como a demonstração de afeto das personagens gera uma resposta emocional, mas também como essas representações revelam que os afetos são construções sociais ligadas a contextos específicos.

O objetivo é analisar como as representações afetivas conseguem humanizar uma comunidade marginal. Com isso em mente, o foco recairá, também, em como as identidades são formadas nas narrativas em questão e como as próprias narrativas podem ser um motor de coletivização social. O trabalho passa ainda por uma análise sobre o poder narrativo destas obras e, consequentemente, o seu sucesso em representar a comunidade gay e os problemas que continuamente enfrenta. Finalmente, dado que os afetos representados envolvem questões de pertença e cidadania, apresento uma análise de como estas representações da epidemia do HIV/SIDA ajudam à compreensão das noções de cidadania afetiva e íntima.

Palavras-chave: afeto; intimidade; cidadania; *Angels in America*; *The Normal Heart*

ABSTRACT

From Monsters to Men: Affective representations in HIV/AIDS visual narratives and the experience of citizenship

This thesis will analyse the representations of affect and emotion on homoaffective film narratives that portray the HIV/AIDS epidemic of the 1980s providing audiences with depictions of intimacy in a crisis scenario. The cultural objects in question are *Angels in America* (2003), directed by Mike Nichols, and *The Normal Heart* (2014), directed by Ryan Murphy.

This work is focused on the representations of affect and love in queer narratives, but the approach to these representations will not be based on a queer theory perspective (although it will inevitably be mentioned); in terms of methodology, the core of my approach is affect theory, as applied to cultural, literary and film studies. The representations of love, fragility, and intimacy when affected by disease tend to have a larger appeal as they engage affects considered deeply human. Under scope is how the characters' demonstration of affect for each other generates an emotional response, but also how these representations also reveal that affects are social constructions linked to particular contexts.

The goal is to examine how the representations of affect humanise a marginal community. With that in mind, it will also focus on how identities are formed in the narratives at hand and how these in turn can be an engine for social collectivization. I focus on the storytelling power of these narratives, and consequently on their success in representing the gay community and the issues it has continuously faced. The depicted affects engage the questions of belonging and citizenship at the core of the narratives, and that leads to an overview of how the portrayal of the HIV/AIDS epidemic helps make sense of the notions of affective and intimate citizenship as well.

Keywords: affect; intimacy; citizenship; *Angels in America*; *The Normal Heart*

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Introduction

This thesis was born out of a deep interest in the representations of love and intimate relationships on literature and film. Real intimate relationships, however, are not simply based on loving feelings; they are comprised of a multitude of emotional categories and, in other words, affects. The representation of these affects in a way that does not simply rely on sentimental aspects but is able to convey the complexities of emotion and intimate experiences was what drew me to the present analysis.

Depictions of the intimate and the domestic have for long been a way to empower specific groups; take the example of the rise of novel and its attribution to women. Nancy Armstrong argues that “the history of the novel cannot be understood apart from the history of sexuality” (9). According to Armstrong, the written representations in domestic fiction allowed the modern individual to become an economic and psychological reality. In turn, writing about the domestic woman “afforded a means of contesting the dominant notion of sexuality” that signified desire as the equivalent to a woman’s claim to fortune and family status (Armstrong 8). Hence, the written representations of intimacy and desire made way for a conceptualization of identity that relied on more than predetermined novelistic conventions. As Michel Foucault also makes clear in *The History of Sexuality – Volume I*, sexual relations can be the site for changing power relations. Foucault claims that this change in power relations through sexuality can happen when the attention to sex is not repressed (Foucault 8). I follow the Foucauldian notion that attention to language and representations of intimacy can help extract political meanings from narratives.

Getting acquainted with Armstrong’s ideas about the empowerment that the novel allowed to women, and Foucault’s notions of sexuality as a social construct, I became more interested in exploring how these concepts can be applied to other social groups and other narrative forms, especially through the lens of affect theory, a notion that threads along similar paths as that of sentimentality. As a result, there are two main visual narratives upon which this thesis is built: *Angels in America* (2003) directed by Mike Nichols, a television series based on the play by Tony Kushner (1991), and *The Normal Heart* (2014), directed by Ryan Murphy, a film based on the play by Larry Kramer (1985). I chose these works because both focus on homoaffective relationships set against the backdrop of the HIV/AIDS scourge of the 1980s in the U.S., and

both convey very strong affective and intimate representations. These representations engage important questions in U.S. culture: for instance, the depictions of intimacy blur the lines between what are traditionally considered private and public narratives, and it is possible to see how these antithetical concepts influence one another. Inevitably, connections with Jonathan Demme's groundbreaking work *Philadelphia* (1993) will sometimes be made, as it was the first box-office and critically acclaimed Hollywood film to openly depict (a gay man) living with HIV/AIDS. However, this film will serve only as brief comparison in few important aspects and will not be analysed in depth.

Both television screenplays for *Angels in America* and *The Normal Heart* were adapted by the original authors. Much like the original stage versions, the selected materials are critically acclaimed, award-winning works; their presence in cinemas and television, as also their acclaim in award shows account for their popularity among viewers. *Angels in America*, whose stage version had previously won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama and the Tony Award for Best Play when it opened on Broadway, in 1993, won the Emmy Award for Outstanding Miniseries, with ten more wins in other categories, in 2004. *The Normal Heart*, which won the Tony Award for Best Revival of a Play in 2011, went on to win the Emmy Award for Outstanding Television Film in 2014. *Philadelphia* was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay and won the Academy Award for Best Actor in a Leading Role, in 1994. They are not, however, classical or canonical works. Supporting my decision to choose them as my objects of study, I echo Lauren Berlant's words on the importance of engaging with popular culture materials, for "[their] very popularity (...) makes [them] important. [Their] very ordinariness requires an intensified critical engagement with what had been merely undramatically explicit." (Berlant 1997: 12) Which is to say that these films have drawn the attention of critics, but especially of the public, for a reason. Last but not least, it should be added that being originally plays, Kushner's and Kramer's works were able to reach larger audiences through their adaptation to film and TV series.

Another reason why I decided to examine the adaptations of the plays instead of focusing on the original texts, is my belief that there is much to be gained from the visual component of film when theorizing affect, as film is in itself a very affecting medium. My stance is aligned with Virginia Woolf's early considerations of the medium: "cinema has within its grasp innumerable symbols for emotions that have so far failed to find expression" in other mediums (Woolf 309).

Pragmatically speaking, the act of watching a film or a play is different, too. Of course, the brain and the mood adjust to the circumstance of being in a cinema or a theatre, but when watching a film, the whole action is equidistant to the viewer, much more than it would be when watching a play. Following this line of thought, it is important to bear in mind that both *Angels in America* and *The Normal Heart*'s depictions of intimacy will be a major topic of analysis. Hence the study of their adaptation into the TV medium is relevant, as the audience that watches these works is, most likely, watching at the nucleus of their intimacy. These features, along with the creation of sets (streets, apartments, vehicles), visual and sound effects, and soundtrack help the viewer to look *with* instead of just *at* the unfolding narrative and characters on screen. Specifically for narratives that depict HIV/AIDS, the visual component is important due to the focus it allows on the body – that is the case with the visual representation of skin lesions associated with the illness, which will be closely explored in the first chapter of this thesis.

A particular case for the importance of film for affective visualisation is the nuance of emotion that the actors can bring to the characters. The actor Ian McKellen claims that this is a crucial difference between acting on stage and on film, because on film “the camera is very like somebody just in the room with you”, whereas in theatre the audience is not “engaged in the action of the play. They are there only to be an audience who listens and a spectator who watches” (YouTube). In other words, there can be greater intimacy in the engagement with the viewer through film narratives, which is important for more neutral emotional analysis. As Linda Hutcheon argues, the different media and genres that stories are transcoded to and from in the adapting process are not just formal entities, they actually represent various ways of engaging audiences. They are, in different ways and to different degrees, all “immersive,” but while some media and genres are used to tell stories, others show them (Hutcheon xiv).

Still, it is important to look at the films with tools that allow the viewer to critically engage with the works, especially as these are focused on a specific group, the gay community, under very complex circumstances, the HIV/AIDS scourge of the 1980s. As Gillian Rose points out in *Visual Methodologies. An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials* (2001), looking carefully at images entails looking at how they offer particular visions of social categories (Rose 11). She further quotes John Berger on how images of social difference work not simply for what they show but also for the kind of seeing they invite (Rose 12). As Carolyn Finney stated:

The power that images and words have in stigmatizing a people or community can have far-reaching psychological and material consequences. How one's identity is constructed

through representations calls into question whose social realities are maintained and sustained by such representations and who benefits from the perpetuation of these depictions. (67)

Although Finney's point of view was applied to the documentation of the African American community, I make her words my own when applied to the visualisation of queer narratives. The characters represented in *Angels* and *The Normal Heart* experience what Lawrence Grossberg calls "everyday alienation", something which is different from other more common experiences: "things are not the way [they] want or expected them to be" (Grossberg 103). This affective view complements Susan Sontag's considerations on the potential of art to be "an instrument for modifying consciousness and organizing new modes of sensibility" (Sontag 40). Hence, the processes of identification with the characters and the issues in the narratives can result in the creation of affective common ground both for those who relate to the representations on screen and for those who see the narratives as something that depicts 'the Other'. For the latter, affective visualisation of films can become a site where empathy is produced, thus helping to achieve affective common ground between different groups. As Lawrence Grossberg further argues, "different groups have available to them different possibilities for how they might be located within and occupy such affective modes of living" (109).

By engaging with these materials, the viewer can therefore become aware of issues and topics that are very influential to a specific community, as these films are also vehicles for activism. They allow for greater conscience regarding social movements and groups, which is important in raising awareness to community-specific topics, particularly a community that to this day continually faces backlash and discriminatory policies around the world. Also, since the 1980s, HIV/AIDS has been categorized as a 'global epidemic', according to the World Health Organization (WHO)¹, and a 'pandemic', according to the Centre for Disease Control (CDC)², which furthers the ever-increasing need of attention to the issue. A further motivation to analyse these works is that "we may actually read or see [the] so-called original after we have experienced the adaptation" (Hutcheon xiii), and in so doing, contribute to the endurance of a

¹ <https://www.who.int/teams/global-hiv-hepatitis-and-stis-programmes/hiv/strategic-information/hiv-data-and-statistics> – Accessed on 2 June 2021.

² <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5531a1.htm> – Accessed on 2 June 2021.

piece of art, while at the same time keeping afloat the memory of struggle of certain groups and communities.

The thesis is organized in two main chapters, divided into several subsections. The titles of the chapters and subsections may sound familiar as I took the liberty to retrieve them from cultural references or even direct quotes from the film and the miniseries. These titles function as metaphors that articulate the themes analysed in each section. In the first chapter, titled “The (he)art of movi(e)ng people”, the films will be explored through the lens of affect theory, and the questions what is affect theory?, and what do we gain from watching affectively? will be answered, thus moving beyond the mere aesthetic interpretation of the visual representations of affect. Focusing mostly on more recent approaches to affect theory – a theory that has evolved from the writings of Baruch de Spinoza to Raymond Williams’s notion of “structures of feeling” – the theoretical framework will be exposed with a focus on its application to film theory and, particularly, to the visualisation of HIV/AIDS narratives. I expect to provide critical and theoretical tools to increase the reader’s emotional attentiveness. This is the main focus of the thesis and therefore the theme that is more expanded on. In the subsection “Can there be angels in America? Representations of affect in queer stories”, affects such as grief, happiness, pleasure, and love will be analysed. Although both *Angels* and *The Normal Heart* are very enriched by emotional complexities, the former is a larger work. Against Kramer’s two-hour film, Kushner’s work extends for over six hours, in a more intricate narrative structure. *Angels* is divided in two parts, and from the second part onwards the time frame becomes less linear. Besides, the narrative itself entangles plots of different characters whose paths would not normally cross. Despite having certain standalone quality, these subplots are connected, taking place simultaneously, among a group of interconnected characters. Therefore my examination of *Angels* will occupy a bigger portion of the spotlight (so to speak).

Although the main focus is on affective representations in visual narratives, my dealing, in the first chapter, with the notions of identity and social politics makes way for these concepts to be explored in regard to their influence on the experience of citizenship, in the second chapter. As it will become clear, affect is not merely a descriptive narrative tool. Affects are political and, as Lawrence Grossberg claims:

affect functions as the energetic glue that attaches subjects to objects and experiences, that stitches bodies and subjects into formations and organizations of social (rather than individual) experience; it provides the stickiness that binds relations together into larger and

larger spaces, each with its own sense of coalescence, coherence or consistency. Affective organizations and formations can become sites of struggle. (107)

Hence, the second section, entitled “An intimate epidemic: the experience of citizenship in a bad dream the world is having” will examine how both *Angels in America* and *The Normal Heart* depict the gay community’s struggle in the United States of America, and how the characters’ experience of citizenship is affected by their ‘intimate troubles’ and hindered by their affective (dis)connection to the nation-state. With that goal in mind, I will follow Martha Nussbaum’s theory of narrative imagination and Ken Plummer’s notion of the importance of sexual storytelling to processes of identity construction and the creation of affective communities.

In the second chapter, my endeavour is to emphasize the importance of the narrative imagination applied to visual narratives that denounce social issues and discrimination against the gay community, especially in a context where the experience of intimacy is put to the test. Through their narrative power, strengthened by their visual component, these works are able to raise consciousness to issues that the gay community continuously faces, that are here exposed at a fractural period in the fight for gay rights. This denunciation can open a pathway to processes of identification for members of the gay community and nurture a sense of community amongst those who empathise with the stories and characters on screen, which is to say, those who become affectively connected.

Undoubtedly, visual works like *Angels* and *The Normal Heart* are in themselves activist pieces of art and are in turn able to generate activism. This is particularly evident in *The Normal Heart*, and it will be more closely explored in the second chapter too. As a site of activism, the engagement of these narratives with the cultural imaginary of the U.S. can result in a continuous production of social meanings that does not allow the fight for equality to subside and demand the extension of the very notion of citizenship – hence my considerations on the idea of intimate citizenship as well.

1. The (he)art of movi(e)ng people

The following chapter intends to produce an affective reading of the selected visual narratives that explore affective relationships set against the health crisis of the HIV/AIDS epidemic of the 1980s in the United States of America: Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* and Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart*. In order to provide a theoretical framework for the understanding of the analysis, I shall first answer the following questions, what is affect theory? And what constitutes an affective reading?

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “affect” as “the way in which one is affected or disposed; mental state, mood, feeling, desire, intention”. What one may extract from this definition is, then, that the possibility of affect can be twofold; affect can refer to the power of an individual affecting another and/or in turn be affected, and, at the same time, affect can refer to a mental state, mood, feeling, desire or intention of one's own. The former presumes an exteriority of affect and the latter allows for an interior reading of affect.

The relational aspects of affect have been the principal focus of affect theorists, which can be explained by understanding one or more of the branches of the genealogical tree of this transdisciplinary critical field. In fact, one main aspect of affect theory is its many derivations and applications. What will follow is an interpretative affective analysis that observes the Spinozan/Deleuzian genealogy of the study of affect, guided by the more recent contributions to the field from theorists such as Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, Jan Slaby and Christian Von Scheve. These critics have helped create a framework for contextualizing the study and the importance of affect as a critical lens, alongside others who have contributed to specific applications and further currents of affect research in cultural studies, such as Lauren Berlant and Sara Ahmed.

Since the 1990s, academia has seen a turn to affect or an affective turn in many disciplines, but it is important to observe that the study of affect and the emotions was not a trend started in that period. In fact, affect and emotion has historically been a critical and analytical focus in its own merits. Melissa Gregg's and Gregory J. Seigworth's, and subsequently, Jan Slaby's and Christian Von Scheve's works on affect theory are my core references. I will firstly follow their reflections on affective phenomena and emotions as originally elaborated by Baruch Spinoza in 1667, and its later interpretation by Gilles Deleuze in 1968 and Brian Massumi in 1995, who placed the generation of affect in the relations between bodies and worlds. The relational

aspects of affect were essential to the appropriation of affect studies by feminist, and subsequently queer, readings of the theory throughout the 1990s. These scholars have reclaimed the body to centre-stage as container and vessel of transmission of affective charges and helped dilute the barriers between the private and the public spheres by focusing on the everyday experience and the effects that continuous and enforced social practices have on disciplining bodies willing to traverse the norm.

It is important to state early on that there is not, as Gregg and Seigworth have said, a “single, generalizable theory of affect” (3), which allows plenty of room for discussion and development in research and critical thinking. To make sense of this genealogy of social and humanistic critical theory, I will start by resorting to recent work developed on the interpretation of the works of Spinoza, including Deleuzian readings.

Spinoza stated that “[n]o one has yet determined what the body can do” (qtd in Gregg and Seigworth 3), hinting at the potential of the body as quite an unknown field from which many theories could arise. This perspective will allow us to circle back to the idea of *possibility* that was mentioned in the beginning of this chapter. According to Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth:

affect is in many ways synonymous with *force* or *forces of encounter*. The term ‘force’, however, can be a bit of a misnomer since affect need not be especially forceful (...) In fact, it is quite likely that affect more often transpires within and across the subtlest of shuttling intensities (...) At once intimate and impersonal, affect *accumulates* across both relatedness and interruptions in relatedness, becoming a palimpsest of force-encounters traversing the ebbs and swells of intensities that pass between ‘bodies’ (bodies defined not by an outer skin-envelope or other surface boundary but by their potential to reciprocate or co-participate in the passages of affect). (2, italics in the original)

From this brief glimpse into the essence of affect, we can take derive important notions: the dynamic aspect of the transmission of affect in an encounter and also the multilevel of intensities that affect may take. Let us first make sense of the transmission of affect or its relational dynamics. In *Affective Societies – Key Concepts*, the authors highlight the Spinozan notion of “relational ontology”, which is to say the “dynamics of mutual effective impingement in relations, that is, between individual entities (...) [A]n individual is nothing more or less than *how it manifests in relations of affecting and being affected.*” (Slaby and Mühlhoff 30, italics

in the original). In this Spinozan definition, adopted by Deleuze, the individual's relations are central because it is impossible to separate emotional and bodily reactions. In this view, affects at play are always bouncing off one another's bodies, never having a one-sided or unilateral impact. One *affects* and in turn *is affected*. However, in my approach to affect theory, I consider the importance of affective inner states as well, choosing not to exclude them from my analysis for their apparent individual characteristics or inability to transform another body; I mean that I do not reduce it to the transference between individuals. In the selected visual narratives' plots at stake, the inner states in conflict are a major concern, for they generate constant struggles for acceptance – of others but also of the individual. Therefore, the inner affective states portrayed in the visual narratives will be as equally relevant as the transmission of affects or affective relations.

What must be considered through the analysis of the selected narratives is that, following this approach of assessing inner states and affective states in their multilevel intensities and expressions, the discussion will not be limited to what Slaby and Mühlhoff refer to as “encounters between bodies that involve a change – either in enhancement or diminishment – in their respective bodily capacities” (Slaby and Mühlhoff, 27). Having established the importance of interior states in this work, it is vital indeed to pay attention to the notion of the body and bodily capacities. As explained earlier, the notion of the body may not be thought of merely as the physical, skin-encased human body. It is that and more. The category body is key, as these narratives are focused on the representation of the frail body, the sick body, the conflicted body, the body in relation with itself and with others. But it is also important for understanding the creation of collective bodies, that is, the potential of relational affect in the approximation of groups with shared views and identical values and experiences. Making use of *Affective Societies – Key Concepts* once more, the title of the book itself provides insight into this potentiality of affect for community-making, as “relational affect is a driving force in the formation and subsequent consolidation of larger aggregates of bodies” (Slaby and Mühlhoff, 27). As Berlant notes, the potential in the attention to emotional and affective experience is that it does not require substantial likeness between individuals to generate empathy and attentive collective care through ethical practices (Berlant 2012: 86-87). The selected visual narratives portray the gay community as a collectivization of individual bodies with shared identities, under a specific set of circumstances, the health crisis derived from the HIV/AIDS epidemic of the 1980s in the US. This collective body comes together in facing the deadly and unknown

disease, forming an affective community as it encounters allied forces. But I shall elaborate more on this notion further on.

Finally, it is important to assess the validity of the distinction between affect and emotion, which has been cause for disagreement. Following Spinoza's approach to the study of affect, this dichotomy should be deconstructed. In *Ethics*, Spinoza used the terms affections (*affectio*) and affects (*affectus*) not interchangeably but as different faces of one main whole aspect. Therefore, *affectio* would refer to the relations established between agents, and *affectus* would be defined as durational transitions from one state of being into another. According to Slaby and Mühlhoff, "viewed from this angle, affects-as-*affectus* might be separately individuated and named, thus approaching what in current terminology is referred to as emotion" (Slaby and Mühlhoff, 29)

It follows that, when studying affect, emotions cannot be discarded as they are relational categories of affect and carry in them the potential for the realization of affect. Most importantly, the specification of emotions provides us with cultural and linguistic tools that allows us to categorize what Deleuze theoretically framed as the "pure 'possibles' of affect, those of 'sensation', 'becoming' [and] 'force'" in his formulation of affect as "the trace of one body upon another, the state of a body insofar as it suffers the action of another body" (Brinkema 24). In realizing affect, the emotion can be read as the affective imprint upon a body, or the fulfilling of the potential of affect into a less abstract conceptualization. My approach therefore relies on the notion that emotions must be regarded as part of an integrated conceptual field that encompasses affect, emotion, and feeling. With this in mind, we can establish the importance of multilevel intensities and expressions of affective states, as the affective dynamic relations portrayed in the selected visual narratives consolidate in representations of categorical emotional – interior or exterior – states.

The works I examine in this thesis have the ability to appeal to the audience through the representation of sensitive topics that merge marginality and basic civil rights, set against the weaving of human relationships. It is important to explore the intricacy of these representations and relations and meanings from the shared experience of the visualization of these films. The intention is to demonstrate the power in these storytelling devices, drawing upon Deleuze's notion of art as thriving in the overlap of the extraction, production, and prodding of affect (Brinkema 24)

Central to the affective visualization of the selected works is the representation of the gay minority, a marginalized community with specific characteristics and idiosyncrasies. This accounts for the reproduction of common feelings and affects within a specific emotional framework. For Raymond Williams, the quality of social experiences and relationships, as distinct from other qualities, can be associated with the sense of a generation or period – and I would argue, with a community or group as a social formation – and these relations and the changes that occur within that particular context can be defined as changes in ‘structures of feeling’. For Williams, the active readings of objects in the visual and literary arts that deal with social experiences and relationships are especially relevant because they produce:

(...) meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt, and the relations between these and formal systematic beliefs are in practice variable (including historically variable), over a range from formal assent with private dissent to the more nuanced interaction between selected and interpreted beliefs and acted and justified experiences. (...) We are talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought (...) We are then defining these elements as a ‘structure’: as a set, with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension. (Williams 23)

The visual narratives that are the basis of this work deal with representations of the social experience of the gay community against sets of challenges. The affective visualization of the works in turn will help make sense of the experiences and social relations portrayed as cultural living processes, that is, as structures of feeling. Depictions of the gay experience are inevitably representations of the expression of intimacy of the community, and the freedom of the community to fulfil intimate desires, against the social *status quo* – that of heterosexual relations. Members of the gay community see the potential of their bodies, or the collective body, limited by the reinforcement of the heterosexual norm, and they are constricted to action within certain parameters. The delimitation of intimate *versus* public is blurred. Following Sara Ahmed’s words in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, “heterosexuality becomes a script that binds the familial with the global” (Ahmed 144). The enforcement of heterosexuality as the ruling norm supports a narrative of exclusion of less valuable life forms and further exclusion of the ‘other’. These narratives have the power to shape bodies and lives, both for those who abide by the hegemonic narrative and those who depart from it in the ways they live, love, and take action in their intimate spheres of home and work. As Ahmed further argues: “[i]t is

important to consider how compulsory heterosexuality – defined as the accumulative effect of the repetition of the narrative of heterosexuality as an ideal coupling – shapes what it is possible for bodies to do, even if it does not contain what is possible to be.” (145)

It is necessary to consider the importance of alternative narratives to the norm as a form of contribution to the resistance against heterosexualnormativity as the only valid affective form, so that alternative modes of living and loving can no longer be seen as a threat to the social ordering of life. Plays and films like *Angels in America* and *The Normal Heart* can function as counternarratives that expose the value of alternative modes of life, whilst denouncing the social and political work that still needs to be done in order to minimize discrimination and effect normalization. The focus on the affective charges of the visual narratives hopefully endows the viewers with tools to make sense of them through the portrayal of relational dynamics and the observation of collective atmospheres. The audience will also grasp how the relations and modes of living represented on screen can permit the creation of space for the normalization of different forms of relationships and expressions of intimacy. Therefore, interpreting these narratives invested in affective and emotional visualisation allows one to become attentive to the spectrum of affects displayed in these dynamics, and hence fulfil the potential for the cultivation of affective collective ground. As Berlant states, “[i]n attending to, representing, and standing for these alternative modes of being, we seek to provide new infrastructures for extending their potential to new planes of convergence.” (Berlant 2012: 88) These new infrastructures can compose new structures of feeling, and thus help make sense of new experiences and social relations, developing in a particular time period. As will be more closely explored ahead, along with the question of intimacy, other affects are common to the three visual objects at hand, such as desire and its physical expression, grief, shame, and, of course, love in its different manifestations.

1.1. Can there be angels in America? Representations of affect in queer stories

Film is an emotional medium of storytelling. As Darragh Greene and Graham Price state, “some filmmakers have anatomized emotion and human relationality on screen in a variety of sophisticated ways via their deployment of various aesthetic, philosophical, and psychological tropes.” (Greene and Price 2) This is the strategy adopted in the narratives under analysis, which

have the ability of emotionally appealing to the audience. The interactions and emotional representation between the characters aim at giving visibility to a disenfranchised community in the wake of an unknown deadly threat. Other recent critics, such as Marco Abel, Giuliana Bruno, Lisa Cartwright, and Steven Shaviro, have written about affect in film studies, insisting that a new approach is required in the study of representation. This turn to affect in film studies allowed for the appearance of multiple threads of academic work that converged from multidisciplinary fields inspired by feminist and queer theory, and literary and cultural studies. Hence, an affective visualization of film is what can help the viewer see beyond the aesthetic value of the work and mere contemplation. It must not be seen as a reduction to empathy but as a way of strengthening the viewer's gaze and activate their sensibility to what is shown and told on screen. Parting from an affective viewing of the films based solely on aesthetics, as authors like Brinkema support that building upon the emotional categories portrayed on screen can help the engagement of the viewer with the social aspects represented. Drawing on psychologist of affect Silvan Tomkin's concepts, scholars have conceptualized affect as being contagious. As affect is transmitted from one body to another, it can trigger emotions and feelings of tenderness, shame, rage, compassion or fear (Gibbs 2001: n.p.). Applied to film studies, this transmission of affect – both between characters and between them and the audience – reflects the ways artistic representations affect the spectators.

Affects of shame, grief, love and understanding in each work under analysis are associated with the representations of emotion against the backdrop of the HIV epidemic of the 1980s. The characters are the representation of bodies on screen, and it is in their relationships that one can find the *potentialities* of affect and affective charges. On the final chapter, the focus will be on analysing how these visual narratives can suggest the notion of intimate citizenship, through their affective narrative power on the viewership, but for now the attention will be focused on the contribution of these narratives to the normalization of queer feelings in U.S. cultural objects which is achieved by their representation of intimacy and emotions.

1.2. Angels in America

I shall focus on Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* first. The complete title of the original two-part play is *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes, Millennium Approaches and Perestroika*. The adaptation of the play into a miniseries, by Kushner himself, was very

well achieved as it was able to maintain the main aspects and integral dialogue of the original script. The semi-fantastical story begins in October 1985, spilling into the beginning of 1986 and finishing with an epilogue in 1990, revolving around an ensemble of characters that are all connected in some way or another. It is noteworthy to point out that some of the characters in *Angels* are depictions of fictionalized versions of real people. Such is the case of Roy M. Cohn, the successful New York lawyer who, as Kushner points out in the character description in *Millennium Approaches* (the first part of the play) is based on the late Roy M. Cohn, a famous lawyer who became notorious for his participation in the Rosenberg trial. Except that “this Roy is a work of dramatic fiction; his words are my invention, and liberties have been taken.” (Kushner n. p.) The inspiration to use real people of national relevance for characters adds up to the narrative power in the portrayal of relationships between the characters and plays a part in strengthening the viewers’ process of identification with the story on screen.

If the struggle of living with HIV/AIDS and experiencing intimacy in the midst of illness is one of the main themes of the plot, the entanglement of that struggle with the individuals’ confrontation with social, religious and political issues furthers the blurring of the lines between what may be deemed a private or a public concern.

The series opens with the funeral of Louis Ironson’s grandmother, an American Jewish, officiated by Rabbi Isidor Chemelwitz. As the Rabbi speaks in a brief monologue about the deceased Sarah Ironson, his words create a collective atmosphere in a sermon that links Sarah’s personal history with that of her community, blurring the frontiers of where the individual ends and the collective begins, as he reflects on how he is able to know Sarah through the history of her community:

I do not know her and yet I know her. She was... (*he touches the coffin*) ... not a person but a whole kind of person, the ones who crossed the ocean, who brought with us to America the villages of Russia and Lithuania – and how we struggled, and how we fought, for the family, for the Jewish home, so that you would not grow up *here*, in this strange place, in the melting pot where nothing melted. Descendants of this immigrant woman, you do not grow up in America, you and your children and their children with the goyische names, you do not live in America, no such place exists. (...) You can never make that crossing that she made, for such Great Voyages in this world do not any more exist. But every day of your lives the miles that voyage between that place and this one you cross, Every day. You understand me? In you that journey is. (Nichols, Ep. 1, 00:03:40 – 00:05:46)

This speech is made over the screening of black and white archive images, presumably of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, of immigrants arriving in the U.S. with packed luggage, taking this country as their new home, bringing with them the ideals of the Jewish home and the would-be American family. From the Rabbi's eulogy, the quest of belonging, and what that means in the U.S. melting pot, stands out and gives the start to the narrative. Gradually, it will become clear that the great voyage for the characters in *Angels* will not be one of a geographical kind, like Sarah Ironson's and her ancestors', but the great voyage for acceptance, for the feeling of belonging and coming to terms with oneself and with others. Particularly for queer characters, the voyage is translated as the quest for being able to fully experience citizenship, much in the same way as the immigrants who sailed to the U.S. years ago. Hence, the America portrayed is no longer a destination but rather where the voyage constantly takes place, in each of its citizens; through that constant struggle, no such place can definitely exist. The linking of the individual character's plotlines with nationality are constant across the narrative.

After the funeral, Louis's boyfriend, Prior Walter, puts his arm around him. The couple only embraces once they cross the corner, away from the funeral home, and it is implied to the viewer that this type of affectionate behaviour is not well-regarded by Louis's family in public or familial affairs. Apparently, the couple is not able to act comfortably at family events, having to keep some demonstrations of affect private. Louis apologises to Prior for not having introduced him to his family, even if they have been together for four years, because he "always get[s] so closety at these family things" (Nichols, Ep.1, 00:15:10), to which Prior replies that he gets very "butch". At family events, Louis refers to himself as Lou as he is afraid of his sexuality being exposed by his sibilant S sound. This is the first moment in *Angels* where the difficulties in the intersection of homosexuality with the category of family are exposed; different affective spheres must be kept separate and different types of intimacy must not intersect.

Moments later, Prior breaks the news that he has been diagnosed with HIV/AIDS. This revelation and the following consequences are the trigger to the many connections that ensue between characters whose paths, in another way, would not cross. Prior's revelation to Louis is overwhelming and that feeling will become evident as the story progresses and the couple's daily intimacy is disrupted by the bodily changes and debilitation that come with living with HIV/AIDS. The disclosing of the diagnosis is visually marked as Prior reveals his first physical

blemish of the disease (and possibly one of the most commonly visible marks associated with HIV/AIDS), a Kaposi's Sarcoma skin lesion.

Prior: K.S., baby. Lesion number one. Lookit. The wine-dark kiss of the angel of death.

Louis (*Very softly, holding Prior's arm*): Oh please...

Prior: I'm a lesionnaire. The Foreign Lesion. The American Lesion. Lesionnaire's disease.

(...)

Prior: I can't find a way to spare you, baby. No wall like the wall of hard scientific fact. K.S. Wham. Bang your head on that. (Nichols, Ep. 1, 00:17:19)

Despite maintaining a cold attitude in showing Louis his K.S., Prior soon succumbs to his fear in revealing his condition to Louis, as he was frightened by the thought that Louis would leave him. As Louis is emotionally breaking down, ferociously embracing Prior and crying over the news, Prior hopefully asks Louis if he'll come home after his grandmother's burial. "Then I'll come home", Louis assures him. (Kushner 22) However, in this initial moment of the story, the struggle to maintain a loving, intimate relationship in the face of HIV/AIDS begins. In the cemetery, only moments after learning about Prior's AIDS diagnosis, Louis contemplates what abandoning him would mean, exposing his doubts to Rabbi Chemelwitz:

Louis: Rabbi, what does the Hole Writ say about someone who abandons someone he loves at a time of great need?

Rabbi Isidor Chemelwitz: Why would a person do such a thing?

Louis: Because he has to. Maybe this person can't, um, incorporate sickness into his sense of how things are supposed to go. Maybe vomit... and sores and disease... really frighten him, maybe... he isn't so good with death.

Rabbi Isidor Chemelwitz: The Holy Scriptures have nothing to say about such a person.

Louis: Rabbi, I'm afraid of the crimes I may commit. (Nichols, Ep. 1, 00:22:02)

There is an immediacy in Louis's flow of thought from knowing about Prior's diagnose and contemplating abandonment, hinting that fear is a very strong emotion for Louis, brewing right under the surface, constant, waiting for the chance to break-out. He believes he *has to* leave his

lover, that he will not be able to cope with the new challenge posed to their relationship. More than just fear, Louis starts giving in to self-doubt and egoistic sentiments; his inner emotional struggle causes him to fall short of the full potential of his romantic partnership. After his momentary conversation with the Rabbi he is left to face guilt, as Rabbi Chemelwitz points out that, unlike the Catholics, for the Jewish community forgiveness is not an option, only guilt. As another source of discrimination in the U.S., Judaism (among other religious beliefs) is a relevant theme throughout *Angels* and the narrative's connection to religious themes helps assess the influence of social environments and external factors on intimate life, thus fading the lines between the private and the public.

As Prior's body begins to yield to the physical brutality of the disease, the couple's romantic relationship begins to erode. The difficulty in experiencing intimacy while living with the sick body grows between them, as Prior's health deteriorates, manifesting the effects of HIV/AIDS in multiple physical symptoms and Louis displays a degree of refusal of Prior's eventual death, thus being involuntarily unable to provide any comfort to his lover. Prior holds back on telling Louis about the constant developments around his health as he knows he ends up having to comfort Louis afterwards. In that cycle, the pressure on Prior is expanded as he must juggle two parts: that of the patient and that of the provider of solace. This representation of the couple's struggle to balance the romantic relationship allows us to watch and reflect on the isolating power that HIV/AIDS has on the patient: Prior is conflicted in showing all parts of himself to his lover because he is not able to find the support he needs and ends up carrying the weight of his illness quasi-alone, seeing Louis unable to hide his will of escaping this reality for much longer:

Louis: You love me.

Prior: Yes.

Louis: What if I walked out on this? Would you hate me forever?

(Prior kisses Louis on the forehead)

Prior: Yes.

(Prior turns his back on Louis and faces the other way.) (Nichols, Ep. 1, 00:49:17)

The beginning of the end in the couple's romantic relationship is well-marked in this scene. Louis can no longer sustain the possibility of leaving Prior to himself, possibly revealing that what mostly keeps him from doing so is the consequence that abandonment will have on Prior's feelings for him, more than what it would actually mean to Prior in his health condition. Louis is afraid of being confronted with the physical and bodily repercussions of Prior's deteriorating health. Visually, it is possible to assume that Prior anticipates Louis's feelings as even though he kisses Louis on the forehead, a traditionally nurturing act, he responds assertively that his affection towards him would turn from love to hate, if he left. Then, Prior turns his back to Louis: the couple is no longer facing each other, their bodies maintaining neither eye nor physical contact and the couple is separated while on the same bed.

Two months later, we watch Prior suffering his health deterioration, in an episode with high fever, sweating and in pain, defecating blood and collapsing on the floor of their apartment; a hysterical Louis, grossed out by his lover's physical condition, exclaims: "Oh help. Oh help. Oh God oh God oh God help me I can't I can't I can't" (Nichols, Ep. 2, 00:03:51). Once Prior is asleep at the hospital, Louis leaves asking the nurse on duty, Emily, to tell Prior that he says good-bye, but had to go. Giving in to his fear of being confronted with Prior's deteriorating health and the toll it takes on them both, Louis leaves, displaying his inner conflict and guilt. This feeling of guilt becomes apparent as Louis exploits an unprotected sexual encounter with a stranger in the park, immediately after leaving the hospital³: "I want you to fuck me, hurt me, make me bleed", Louis says to the man in the park and after the condom breaks he goes on, "Keep going. Infect me. I don't care. I don't care" (Nichols, Ep. 2, 00:16:22). Louis's actions in the park are not aligned with his fear of disease; more than looking for pleasure in an anonymous sexual encounter, Louis is seeking punishment for his abandonment of Prior in a debilitating health condition and the ultimate punishment in this scenario would be to become infected with the same disease and physical deterioration that Prior was left to face alone.

1.2.1. Look Up! A threshold of revelation: "the most inner part of you is free of disease"

As previously stated, the plot revolves around multiple intricate relationships among characters that would normally not cross paths. In one particular case, two characters do not actually cross paths or even physically meet. Prior and Harper Pitt come together in the fusion of Prior's dream

³ Louis's ambiguous intentions in this encounter are more explicit in the original text of the play.

and Harper's pill-induced hallucination. In this encounter we can find two characters being emotionally affected by each other in a meaningful aesthetically engaging scene. As Prior walks in a silk robe in black and white, he faces himself sitting at a boudoir mirror and applying make-up in a drag version of Gloria Swanson in *Sunset Boulevard*. The physical toll of the illness is clearly very affecting to Prior. Before his dream incarnation of Swanson, he had already mentioned chasing the cat in heels, doing his "best Shirley Booth", and he says the cosmetics he is using are from Clinique's counter at Macy's. This association with American divas and the emphasis on his attention to the cosmetic care of his body reveal the importance of his beauty to him. This is suggested by this private (dream-like) experience of diva citizenship. This term that defines what Wayne Koestenbaum, sees as the "ordinariness touched by sublimity" (84), was crucial to the emergence of a collective gay subcultural imagination, working to create a counterculture. In *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire*, Koestenbaum explores his own connection and form of desire for opera divas, as a process of identification for some gay men. Kushner himself, in the introduction to Koestenbaum's work, claims that he is "not an opera queen, though [he] always wanted to be" (1). Hence, opposing to the prevalent feelings of shame and fear, the association with the diva figure, allows gay men to experience and expose unapologetic pride.⁴

Prior's campness and diva impersonation are then a way to overcompensate the loss of beauty and bodily pleasure. To Prior, applying make-up in the mirror, is a way to perform an act of pleasure. As long as he is able to do so, his pleasure affects are not robbed from him and he does not have to deal with his decaying physique. His moment of appreciating his beauty in the mirror is quickly erased by the anger he feels because of his illness, his sorrow coming to the surface as he confronts himself with the loss of his physical appeal, facing death at 30 years old "robbed of decades of majesty" (Nichols, Ep,1, 00:33:38). His majestic pose dissipates as he exposes his interior struggle, the one he tries to spare Louis from and keep to himself, now openly expressed to the audience in his dream. In this scene, Prior shows his anger towards his sick body, the body that he tries to make beautiful (even if in a dream) by wearing make-up and making his countenance similar to a classic Hollywood diva. Prior also reveals his sorrow in facing the shortening of his expected lifespan as he now faces the closer immediacy of death,

⁴ I believe this empowerment by association with the diva when suggested by aesthetic terms echoes Susan Sontag's notions on Camp culture in which there is: "a relish for the exaggeration of sexual characteristics and mannerisms. For obvious reasons, the best examples that can be cited are movie stars."; Sontag further believes that sexual pleasure can derive from this performance. (Sontag 9)

which is not natural at his age. It is as if he, and the young gay men diagnosed with HIV/AIDS the character represents, are being robbed of achieving the full potential of their lives, cut short by the infectious disease.

As this emotional unravelling is happening, Prior sees Harper appearing and approximating in the reflection of the boudoir mirror. Harper explains to Prior that due to her emotional problems she takes Valium pills that cause her to hallucinate, although she is not addicted as “Mormons are not supposed to be addicted to anything.” (Nichols, Ep. 1, 00:35:33). As the two characters continue to talk, they come across the “threshold of revelation”, which to Harper seems like a very natural phenomenon. The threshold of revelation allows them to almost see-through each other and share knowledge about their innermost thoughts and secrets:

Harper: I can't expect someone who is really sick to entertain me.

Prior: How on earth did you know...?

Harper: Oh that happens. This is the very threshold of revelation sometimes. You can see things... how sick you are. Do you see anything about me?

Prior: Yes.

Harper: What?

Prior: You are amazingly unhappy.

Harper: Oh big deal. You meet a Valium addict and you figure out she's unhappy. That doesn't count. Of course I... Something else. Something surprising.”

Prior: Your husband is a homo. (Nichols, Ep.1, 00:37:27)

By that point in the story, it is clear that Harper and her husband, Joe, face problems in their marriage, but the encounter with Prior at the threshold of revelation is the turning point for Harper's character. In a mixed-state of surprise and denial – “I don't think you intuit very well at all. Joe's a very normal man” – with childlike curiosity – “Do homos take, like, lots of long walks?” – Harper's facial expression of awe gives way to her making sense of the root of her marital problems. Her marriage to Joe has hindered potential, as he is not able to assume his sexual orientation, forcing them both to live a lie. As Harper becomes sad with the revelation

of her husband's hidden homosexuality, she vanishes, expressing yet another revelation towards Prior:

Harper: Deep inside you, there's a part of you, the most inner part, entirely free of disease. I can see that.

Louis: Is that— That isn't true.

Harper: Threshold of revelation. (Nichols, Ep.1, 00:39:32)

As Harper vanishes, Prior is left alone mulling over Harper's words that are heavy with meaning. As Harper tells Prior when they meet, she is a Mormon and in her church they "don't believe in homosexuals", while, as mentioned before, religion is a common theme throughout the narrative⁵. It may be generally understood that whatever the religion, homosexuality is condemned, but in the Mormon church it can be taboo. What happens then, is that Harper is able to overcome the very strict religious boundaries that would separate her from someone like Prior, a homosexual, and emotionally connect with him on a deep level. When she observes that his most inner part is free of disease, she is not referring to his HIV/AIDS diagnosis; her words intend to signify that Prior (and people in the gay community) are free of the social disease that is the stigma of unworthiness causing their marginalization and struggle for truly belonging and acceptance in U.S. society. Still, after briefly contemplating Harper's words, Prior is unable to accept their truth letting his emotional inner struggle take the best of him, as he says that he does not think there is any uninfected part of him and he feels dirty, while contemplating his reflection in the mirror. Although in previous scenes Prior appears to be confident and open about his sexuality, not struggling for self-acceptance with his sexual orientation like some other characters in the story, he now seems to associate his "dirtiness" with his health condition. He feels dirty and completely infected because the stigma of the disease, and the impossibility of cure that furthers that stigma is now sinking into him as some kind of confirmation of the punishment for being gay. Add to that the devaluation that comes with a sexual orientation that does not follow the norm. After all, this was the time when the illness was associated with heterosexual people only in marginal numbers. Hence, HIV/AIDS was for a long time considered to be the punishment for those who lived outside the norm, as a

⁵ The link between homosexuality and religion is a theme that is very present in *Angels in America*, particularly evidenced by the characters associated to Judaism and the Mormon Church. As will be exposed in the 2nd chapter, the title of the play *A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* takes on U.S. issues from a gay perspective. Hence, religious affects are a big influence on many communities' lives.

plague or punishment. In fact, Susan Sontag argues, in *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, that the disease was regarded by moral guardians as a condition sent from above specially aimed at and deserved by the male homosexual community, reclaiming Jerry Falwell's predicament that "AIDS is God's judgement on a society that does not live by His rules". (Sontag 112)

1.2.2. "Real love isn't ever ambivalent"

Angels in America is able to show, however, that even some of those who live by the heterosexual norm are not always able to fulfil their potential for happiness by complying with the 'rules'. Implied in the rules is the idea that if an individual follows the recipe of collecting all necessary items on the nation's pre-approved ideals list, the result of happiness will be clear and simple to achieve. Thus, a man marries a woman, they have children of their own raised in their white picket-fence house and they are happy. In turn, those who do not follow this path will be doomed to lead lives of lesser worth. People can also become alienated from this national fiction of happiness when they try to fit the mold but fail to derive pleasure from the proximity with the object to which the quality of being good is attributed (Ahmed 2011: 37). That is the case of Harper and her husband, Joe. Joe Pitt is Roy M. Cohn's *protégé*, a Mormon that came from Salt Lake to New York City with his wife in pursuit of the American Dream. Joe first appears sitting in Roy's office, as the latter spills a diatribe of cursing in between multiple phone calls, displaying a very aggressive and hypocritical attitude. During Roy's myriad of "Christ sake" and "God-fucking" interjections, Joe is clearly anxious and bothered until he can no longer restrain himself:

Joe: Could you please not take the Lord's name in vain?

(*pause*)

Joe: I'm sorry. But please. At least while I'm...

Roy: Right. Sorry. Fuck... Only in America! (Nichols, Ep. 1, 00:08:55)

The importance of Joe's interruption of Roy's phone ranting is that it shows how religious rules serve as guidance for Joe's life, as he pleads to Roy not to break one of the Ten Commandments (in Abrahamic religions) that prohibits blasphemy. Joe's devotion to the Mormon faith further helps to explain one of the reasons why he is a closeted homosexual who lives an unhappy

heterosexual marriage. Contrastingly, Roy exhibits no particular regard for religious faith but affirms “I respect principles, I’m not religious but I like God and God likes me.” (Nichols, Ep.1, 00:09:18). As Joe tells him he is a Mormon, Roy again exclaims “Delectable, absolutely! Only in America!” (Nichols, Ep. 1, 00:09:27). Despite the contempt Roy demonstrates towards religion, he feels certain that God likes him: a powerful heterosexual white man. In this scene, where the audience first meets Joe and Roy, the latter offers Joe a position in Washington, working for the Attorney General – the fulfilling of Joe’s American Dream, having a state job in the capital city working under the Reagan Administration that he admires. He believes that under Reagan’s Administration “America has rediscovered itself. Its sacred position among nations. And people aren’t ashamed of that like they used to be. This is a great thing. The truth restored. Law restored. That’s what President Reagan’s done”. (Nichols, Ep. 1, 00:23:46)

When Joe returns home to share the news with Harper, the couple displays some awkwardness in their interaction. From their body language on-screen one can extract that there is distance between them, as Joe barely kisses Harper on the lips (“buddy kiss”) and she lingers with pouted lips expecting more contact. The couple is affectively disconnected and that becomes more evident as Joe talks to Harper about moving to Washington, which she is unwilling to do. Joe claims they need a change and Harper refuses that idea:

Harper: We are happy here.

Joe: That’s not really true, buddy, we–

Harper: Well happy enough! Pretend-happy. That’s better than nothing. (Nichols, Ep. 1, 00:19:19)

Harper is aware of the façade that their marriage is and at some level she accepts to settle for this façade, as if being pretend-happy were better than being openly unhappy. The character of Harper follows the trope of the American housewife, the homemaker that looks after the family home and tends to her husband’s needs, getting her satisfaction and happiness from it. However, this role fails, as Harper’s happiness does not come from looking after the family home.

Though it had already been hinted at with Louis’s encounter with his family, homosexuality imposes a challenge to predetermined categories such as family. In the depiction of the Pitt household, *Angels* is able to represent that challenge. The family concept has been subject to a long tradition of theoretical reflection in U.S. culture. In 1869, Catharine Beecher and Harriet

Beecher Stowe tried to find the answer to what family was in their book *The American Woman's Home*. In their answer there is a “stronger and wiser” father who “undergoes toil and self-denial to provide a home”, a mother who becomes a “self-sacrificing labourer to train its inmates”, and the children (inmates) (18). Christian and religious values have secured the tradition of this view of the family, helping this image to persist throughout U.S. history, reaching its apogee in the 1950s with the Cold War (Peterson 112), and later spilling into the conservative Reaganite⁶ years when “a familial politics of the national future came to define the urgencies” of the era. (Berlant 1997: 1). Therefore, definitions of family have long served ideological purposes but consist of a malleable process that can accommodate different social practices that connect specific persons and spaces through broader notions of feeling and experience. Nevertheless, family operates as a system of inclusion and exclusion, processes that have frequently been rearticulated as a tension between “norm” and “deviance”, making the category of family transform from a private to a very public issue. (Peterson 113)

What the Pitts represent is the failure of the traditional configuration of family, thereby exposing the necessity there is for a reconfiguration of the concept. Firstly, Harper and Joe Pitt's family configuration consists of just the two of them as a couple, as they have no children for the housewife to look after. Harper has enough time to look after the house during the day which she however does not; the house is messy, there are boxes laying around as if the couple had just moved into the apartment. We also learnt that Harper has been painting a bedroom for over a year because of the noises she hears inside her head that scare her of going inside the room. Hence, more than being a representation of the trope of the ideal American housewife, Harper is the representation of the failure of that role. Her household is unable to fulfil the idealization of the U.S. family model. In line with this physical disorder, we also learn she sustains a pill addiction. Both Harper and Joe live with their ‘pretend-happiness’ in order to avoid confronting their familial failure that goes against their religious community's beliefs and their nation's family values – the couple's intimacy is affected and limited by constraints of the public sphere.

⁶ The Reagan family is mentioned by Louis, who is anti-Reagan, in conversation with Joe, a Republican: “I mean what's it like to be the child of the *Zeitgeist*? To have the American Animus as your dad? It's not really a *family*, the Reagans, I read *People*, there aren't any connections there, no love, they don't even speak to each other except through their agents. So what's it like to be Reagan's kid? Enquiring minds want to know.” (Kushner 74) This quote suggests that the White House/national paragon family is also a fake, a picture-perfect creation of the idealized American family values.

In their struggle to admit their marital problems, Harper and Joe fail to fully communicate and be open to one another. Joe hides his homosexuality from Harper and Harper tries to conceal the severity of her Valium addiction from Joe. In moments of rupture or disagreement, they resort to silence instead of exploring their problems. In many ways, who they are and what they do remains unknown to one another:

Harper: You don't know what I do.

Joe: You don't stay in all day.

Harper: No.

Joe: Well... Yes you do.

Harper: That's what you think.

Joe: Where do you go?

Harper: Where do *you* go? When you walk. (*Pause, then very angry*) And I DO NOT have emotional problems. (Nichols, Ep. 1, 00:24:55)

Besides beginning to show her suspicion in Joe when he goes out walking, due to her concern about 'homos taking long walks', one of Harper's most vocal outbursts happens when Joe refers her emotional problems, which she denies having:

Harper: And if I do have emotional problems it's from living with you. Or—

Joe: I'm sorry, buddy, I didn't mean to—

Harper: Or if you do think I do then you should never have married me. You have all these secrets and lies.

Joe: I want to be married to you, Harper.

Harper: You shouldn't. You never should." (Nichols, Ep. 1, 00:25:07)

Harper's suspicion of Joe's secrets starts to take hold of her in this scene in their bedroom, the spatial epitome of intimacy for a couple (mirroring Prior and Louis divergence in their bedroom) and a change in her perspective about her emotional problems occurs, too. Despite her Valium addiction and the imaginary scenarios that play in her head, Harper's possible

mental health issues are described as emotional problems, particularly by Joe, thereby lacking the diagnosis necessary to be considered an emotional disorder. Joe mentions that Harper's issues and pill addiction began in her youth, before the marriage, due to her troubled childhood, something she does not talk about, but got worse after she miscarried. But one can furthermore extract that Harper's emotional problems are of an affective kind, a condition of affect worsened by her marital problems and the couple's lack of physical and sexual intimacy. This reading finds its echo when Joe is finally able to admit his sexuality to Harper, as he assumes that the man that Harper is so afraid of, the man with the knife hiding in their apartment, is actually her mind's representation of Joe and his secrets. It is her fear that the unknown side of Joe, which she does not recognize, instils in her.

Observing their sexual disconnection is not to say that the Pitts marriage is completely deprived of affection. Although the sexual component of their relationship is absent, they resemble very good roommates, and they care deeply about each other. As they refer to each other as "buddy", an affectionate even if odd term for a married couple, we can see that their relationship functions on some affective level, even if not on a sexual one.

After her hallucinating encounter with Prior at the threshold of revelation, Harper's attitude towards Joe secret behaviour, and towards the lack of intimacy and affection in their marriage changes. While Joe links Harper's behaviour to the pill addiction, Harper says that pills are not what cause her to be a "mentally deranged sex-starved pill-popping housewife". As she tries to find the courage to confront Joe about his homosexuality, they address their lack of sexual intimacy, or the intimate and sexual disconnection between their bodies:

Harper: You think you're the only who hates sex; I do; I hate it with you; I do. (...) It's like a punishment. It was wrong of me to marry you. I knew you— *(she stops herself)*

It's a sin, and it's killing us both.

Joe: I can always tell when you've taken pills because it makes you red-faced and sweaty and frankly that's very often why I don't want to...

Harper: Because...

Joe: Because you're not pretty. Not like this.

(...)

Harper: Are you a homo? (Nichols, Ep. 1, 00:45:00)

Because of his fear to face his sexual orientation and fully live his sexuality, Joe sees himself constantly lying, both to himself and to Harper, and even blaming her for their lack of sexual connection. This fosters the tension in the couple and Harper's mental problems and pill addiction. Once Joe is able to accept his sexual identity, he will be able to identify how his behaviour is, in many ways, one of the causes of Harper's emotional instability.

1.2.3. "Everybody is scared in the land of the free"

Fear is one of the strongest affects felt and displayed by the characters in *Angels*. Despite the negative connotation of this affect, it functions in the series as a trigger for change and lies in the root of many characters' behaviour, particularly in the main couple's relationships. Prior and Louis are both scared of Prior's illness; as Prior faces his own mortality and processes his own grief, Louis is scared of the consequences of living with his partner's health condition, struggling to face his own feelings. On the other hand, Joe is scared of admitting his homosexuality – to others and to himself – and Harper is scared of confirming her husband's secrets and afraid of the impact such confirmation will have on her own feelings and her life. As previously exposed, the way that the characters deal with their affects reveals that there is always a relational dynamic.

The Pitts' intimate problems are a representation of the notion that couples who follow the rule of enforced heterosexuality in the U.S. can be prone to failure, too, and that queer people or those who embrace alternative ways of life are not the only ones who fail to realize their nation's ideals of family values. Joe however is adamant in not admitting to himself that he is failing either his national ideals or his religious beliefs. When Harper insists to confront his sexual orientation, Joe's despair in concealing that aspect of his life transpires:

Joe: Stop it. I'm warning you. 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's nothing left, I'm a shell. There's nothing left to kill.

Joe: As long as my behaviour is what I know it has to be. Decent. Correct. That alone in the eyes of God.

Harper: No, no, not that, that's Utah talk, Mormon talk, I hate it, Joe, tell me, say it.

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

(Nichols, Ep. 1, 00:50:12)

In a parallel reading of infectious diseases like HIV/AIDS, Joe tries to find a cure for his condition by killing a hidden part of himself, his true sexuality, imprinted on him by the heteronormativity at both a socio-political and a religious level. In preventing himself from fully expressing his identity, Joe hinders the concretization of his potential in a happy and fulfilled life. Joe's despair is supported by his belief that coming to terms with his sexuality would destroy the 'shell' that he works so hard to maintain, blaming Harper for that destruction, when this confrontation could foster change for the better. When Joe demonstrates his refusal to face his true sexual orientation, we can see a representation on screen of Lauren Berlant's concept of 'cruel optimism'. According to Berlant, all attachments are optimistic even if they don't feel optimistic, as the connection to an object of desire represents the promise of something and being close to that object furthers the feeling of being close to the fulfilment of such promise. Consequently, "cruel optimism names a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic" (Berlant 2011: 93). The cruelty is, then, that the subjects cannot endure the loss of their object of desire, even though possessing this object may negatively affect their well-being; losing the object signifies losing what it promises (either realistically or not) and makes the subject question their certainties and ideologies. For Joe, leading a heteronormative lifestyle is the cruel object of desire and embracing his homosexuality and being honest about it with his wife would mean being farther away from the promise of achieving his object of desire. Joe carries a struggle inside him that he remembers since he was a child looking at pictures of Bible stories, of a man struggling with an angel. In that human *vs.* nonhuman fight, he sees himself fighting off something much stronger than he is, something that he cannot control.

An affective encounter between Joe and Louis is pivotal in the resolution of both characters' impasses in their romantic relationships, however resulting in different endings. In a scene with nuanced sexual innuendos from Louis, where physical contact with Joe is repeated, the pair bonds through their cryptic admissions of fear. Other than the vulgar language used by Louis, Joe does not seem bothered by his behaviour and even confesses admiration for Louis. This

admiration comes from the fact that, in Joe's eyes, Louis is not afraid of his sexuality and in seeing that freedom in Louis, Joe can sense liberation from the constraints of his own struggle with being gay:

Joe: I just wondered what a thing would be... if overnight everything you owe anything to, justice, or love, had really gone away. Free. It would be... heartless terror and (...) Very great. To shed your skin, every old skin, one by one and then walk away, unencumbered, into the morning. (...) I can't *be* this anymore. I need... a change. (Nichols, Ep.2, 00:36:22)

In this encounter, in which each mirrors himself in the desire for freedom that the other wishes for, Joe is able to express for the first time that he needs to change the way he lives his life, beginning the journey to fulfil his potential of a happy life, truthful to himself. At the same time, Louis finds the courage to assume his intentions to Prior. The characters find courage to effect change in their lives through the empathy they feel towards each other. The desire each one feels resonates inside the other not just in the way they listen to one another, but because the desire for change that Joe feels echoes with Louis' own desire. Their interior states have the power to affect each other as they externalize their wishes out loud. After that, Joe is finally able to reveal his sexuality to Harper, while Louis finds the courage to visit Prior in the hospital to tell him he is leaving. Both couples' encounters are emotionally charged, displaying different dynamics of relational power but in both cases the notion of love is fractured and called into question.

For Prior and Louis, the stigma and fear of the illness stand in the way of the realization of love, and instead, are the cause for further isolation and suffering. Louis is afraid of Prior's condition and its meaning for what they would have to endure as a couple living with HIV/AIDS. Although Louis claims that he still loves Prior, he cannot bring himself to be a part of his life in that condition and his decision causes Prior to face AIDS without the support of his lover. In conversation with Prior's best friend, Belize, Louis compares his betrayal of love to that of Cain, in the Bible:

Louis: I think Biblical things, Mark of Cain, Judas Iscariot and his Silver... I miss him so much, but then those sores, and the smell and... where I thought it was going. I could be... I could be... I could be sick, too, maybe I'm sick, too. I don't know." (Nichols, Ep. 3, 00:17:59)

For Harper and Joe, it is his fear of himself that has led them to be so emotionally distant from each other and so physically and sexually disconnected:

Joe: I knew this when I married you. I've known this I guess for as long as I've known anything, but... I don't know, I thought maybe with enough effort and will I could change myself... but I can't (...) I don't have any sexual feelings for you, Harper. And I don't think I ever did. (Nichols, Ep. 2, 00:44:04)

These scenes that are interplayed on screen, entangling both couple's storylines, are one pivotal moment in the series' appeal to the audience's empathy⁷ for a community that is not widely represented on screen. The representation on *Angels* brought to screen the fight against a deadly epidemic and the pressure that such epidemic puts on intimate lives, already marginalized in so many social and political ways. We witness Joe facing ridicule in his confession to his mother, Hannah, a very strict Mormon woman from Salt Lake City, after having seen Joe's arc and his struggle to confront his identity and accept himself – the root to self-acceptance is not linear and it does not always encompass an immediate happy ending. Acceptance by others plays a big factor in the achievement of self-acceptance. We witness Harper's realization of the lies that her marriage is built upon and face the fact that her emotional problems are exacerbated because of the insecurity that is instilled in her from her marriage to Joe and also the intimacy and affection that union has failed to provide her with. We witness a bedridden but raging Prior, visibly scarred from AIDS with noticeable skin lesions in his face, being left by his lover who is too scared of the physical aspects of this illness to stand by his side. The visual representation of the emotional hardships and struggles of these characters is key to enable the viewers to understand the multi-layered difficulties that are synonymous with being gay. In these scenarios, the audience is affected by the relational dynamics on screen, and through the fostering of empathy they take part almost as a third element in the visualisation of the scenes.

1.2.4. “Density of desire, gravity of skin: not physics but ecstasies makes the engine run”

⁷ Twenty years after the theatre première of *Angels in America*, Marcia Gay Harden, who originated the role of Harper, considers that *Angels* is a moment when “there is a synchronicity with art and a mission of illuminating the human condition”, reminiscing about young gay men who would take their parents to watch the play and then come out to them as gay. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yFiJAI13SiQ> – Accessed on 10 March 2021)

It is after these interspersed scenarios of the couple's separation that Joe is able to experience his sexuality with another man, Louis. Joe's character is affected throughout the narrative by the relation with his wife, with his boss, his mother and, finally, with Louis, with whom he is capable of fulfilling his sexual desire. However, the experience involves the fear of being intimate with the unknown. Joe's nervousness is caused not only because he is having physical intimacy with a man for the first time and letting go of the restraints that controlled that side of his sex life, but because knowing the health scenario in the U.S. at the time, and knowing about Louis's past relationship, that sort of intimacy could signify irreversible health problems:

Joe: Your, uh, boyfriend. He's sick.

Louis: We can cap everything that leaks in latex, we can smear our bodies with nonoxynol-9, safe, chemical sex. Messy, but not dirty. (Nichols, Ep. 4, 00:03:19)

In the 1980s this fear of sex became the norm amongst gay men, a norm that has ever since shadowed the reality of the gay community. As Sontag also pointed out, the fear of HIV/AIDS takes away from sex the experience of a spontaneous, present experience, by imposing the link to the participants' past. In the impossibility of being lived as momentaneous coupling, sex becomes a chain of transmission that involves not only the partner's past but also the past of all former partners (Sontag 121). This scene between Joe and Louis in *Angels* demonstrates to the audience that, for the gay community, the experience of sexuality is indissociable of the feeling of fear and distrust of the other, regardless of the pleasure of physical intimacy. It also suggests that sexual involvement with a new partner carries the responsibility and the weight of all past sexual actions. Fear, then, is experienced as a very physical affect, tangled with the pleasure sensations of the intimacy between two people, and Joe lets go of his fear to succumb to the physical pleasure of intimacy with Louis. As Louis draws closer to Joe, he leads him through a sensuous journey of the body and although Joe is clearly anxious in this new situation, he lets himself immerse in Louis' words and physicality:

Louis: Smell is an incredibly complex and underappreciated physical phenomenon. Inextricably bound up with sex. The nose is really a sexual organ.

(leaning in)

Louis: Smelling and tasting. First the nose, then the tongue. They work as a team, see. The nose tells the body – the heart, the mind, the fingers, the cock – what it wants, and then the tongue explores.

(Louis licks the side of Joe's cheek)

Louis: Salt. (Nichols, Ep. 4, 00:04:31)

In the same way, these physical affects are a final trigger to fulfil the potential for change that had been building up for Louis and Joe, whereas Prior begins to face his illness in a different manner due to new physical experiences, as well. After his separation with Louis, Prior expresses how his whole body hurts and he wants to die. This pain is the physical reflection of his emotional state as he faces loss and rejection. He is also left alone to face the fear of living – and dying – with AIDS. Prior is pushed into a downward spiral of self-loathing and demotivation, struggling to find the will to live.

The physical affects for Prior become a focal turning point when he receives the visit of the Angel, Continental Principality of America, and his sick body assumes almost a divine power, as he merges and fuses bodily with the Angel in intense physical pleasure.



Figure 1. The Angel arrives



Figure 2. *Plasma Orgasmata* - The Angel and Prior bodily fusion

Visually, the first appearance of the Angel is striking as the viewer can recognize the face of Emily, the nurse who looks after Prior at the hospital, and of the Homeless Woman that Hannah Pitt meets when she arrives in New York. The Angel's face is framed by light (Nichols, Ep 3, 00:51:00), much like Emily's face is framed by a ring of light – resembling an aura – previously in the same episode (00:10:00). This is visible while she is examining Prior, showing no fear or disgust. He is completely naked and vulnerable as she touches his body and they look deeply into each other's eyes. By having the face of Emily, the one who cares for Prior with no fear or disgust, who helps him improve his health, the affective connection between the Angel and Prior is already formed. The Angel comes bearing a prophecy for Prior, much like the Homeless Woman was talking about Nostradamus and prophesizing in the street, claiming that “[i]n the new century I think we will all be insane” (Nichols, Ep. 3, 00:28:23). Even though she is a divine entity, the Angel presents many human characteristics which are brought out by ironic and comedic aspects in her apparition. There is blatant irony in her name, Continental Principality of America, reclaiming the superiority of the U.S. in the context of health and social crisis for part of the American population:

Angel: American prophet, tonight you become American eye that pierceth dark. American heart all hot for truth. The true great vocalist, the knowing mind, tongue-of-the-land, seer-head!

Prior: Oh, shoo! You're scaring the shit out of me! Get the fuck out of my room, please?! Oh, please... (Nichols, Ep. 4, 00:28:00)

Though Prior is visibly frightened of the Angel, the scene's comedic aspects help make her appearance nonthreatening and more human. As the Angel announces her arrival with great solemnity, Prior's reaction is to scream to his empty room: "Oh, God! There's a thing in the air! A thing, a thing!" (Nichols, Ep. 4, 00:27:35). She breaks through the ceiling, wings gushing in the wind, speaking in a powerful tone, but then it becomes evident that she didn't prepare her arrival that well, as she is still receiving orders from above and debates with Prior whether or not to break the kitchen tiles to retrieve the Book of Prophecy. Another striking feature of the Angel is that she is full of erotic force – aren't angels supposedly sexless? The Angel's physical connection with Prior culminates in an intense orgasm for both. During their moment of sexual connection, Prior's body and face look healthy with no visible skin lesions like he had seconds before, lying in bed. Hence, the divine entity while taking the physical form of common people, extols the sick man's condition to something close to the divine.

Whether the encounters with the Angel are a product of Prior's imagination or not, the extraction to be made is that the sick body, the body affected by the plague of the 1980s, is the chosen one to carry the Book of Prophecy. This stands for an aggrandizement of the afflicted and marginalized community, with one member of the pariahs being the chosen among Men, almost in Biblical referencing. As the Angel says: "Heaven here reaches down to disaster, and in touching you, touches all of Earth" (Kushner, Ep. 4, 00:32:55). It is a high-stakes encounter in which a very frail and scared human finds courage and empowerment while meeting and connecting with the nonhuman, a metaphor for HIV/AIDS patients dealing with the unknown disease, scared and frail but fighting to build courage. The Angel speaks in a plural *I* – "I I I I am the Book/ I I I I am the bird of America/ I I I I am the Eagle/ I I I I Am the Continental Principality of America." She is four Divine Emanations – Lumen (blue), Candle (gold), Phosphor (green), and Fluor (purple) – manifesting as an aggregate entity (Kushner 316). Implying that it does not stand merely for a divine vision for Prior, this collective *I* also stands for the socio-political evolution of the U.S., representing the most conservative views that are against societal progress and see the change in social norms and migratory movements as a process of self-destruction for society. Once again, there is a representation of the blurred lines between the private and the public, but also of the issues that minorities face against hegemonic forms of oppression in U.S. society.

The angels, Prior learns, live in a city much like San Francisco⁸, after being abandoned by their Maker who grew weary of them, their songs and fornications. God then split the world in two and became enthralled with humanity, forgetting his angels. Prior should then become the Prophet who carries this message of doom, one responsible to stop the unravelling damaging progress that the creation of humanity has caused: “In you the virus of time began!” (Nichols, Ep. 4, 00:34:36). As humanity began to explore, migrate and progress, Heaven began to quake and crumble.

The Angel is telling Prior a tale of forlorn hope: God grew weary of the angels and abandoned them, taking away His love, on 18 April 1906 – the day of the Great San Francisco Earthquake. This story is recognizable to Prior in the figure of the lover who grew weary of him, disenchanted with the reality of their life together, and left;

Angel: In that day, the King of the Universe... He left!

Prior (*crying*): Abandoned.

Angel: And did not return.

(Prior and Belize in parallel, as Prior retells the encounter, sitting in a graveyard facing an angel statue)

Belize: Abandoned. (...) I smell a motif. The man that got away.

Prior: Well, it occurred to me. Louis. (Nichols, Ep. 4, 00:35:58)

The beautiful Angel, though unhuman, exhibits emotional characteristics and shares a familiar story that affects Prior in his comprehension of the encounter. However, the Angel wants Prior to become the prophet who shall cause progress to cease and restore peace to Heaven, even if Belize tries to make him acknowledge that the world only spins forward (Nichols, Ep. 4, 00:36:38).

Kushner’s writing can seem contradictory when it comes to the Angel. On the one hand, the Angel can be read as the connection between the mundane, even the marginal and immoral,

⁸ The city itself has, among its many nicknames, those of "gay capital of the world" and "the gay Mecca", and has been described as "the original 'gay-friendly city'" (<https://www.gaytravel.com/gay-guides/san-francisco>). San Francisco is one of the largest and most prominent LGBTQ communities in the United States, and also one of the most important in the history of American LGBTQ rights and activism, alongside New York City. Accessed on 2 June 2021.

with the divine. On the other hand, the Angel stands for conservatism. As Kushner points out on his “Nine Notes Regarding the Angel”, the Angel is not human (316/321). The Angel is a scorned lover desperate to retrieve her love at any cost before everything crumbles. That is why she is so keen on stopping evolution. This parallels Prior’s struggle with loneliness, as he gets weaker and longs for his lost love, too. However, as Prior will later realize, and as Kushner makes very clear, the Angel is not human, so the ironic desire to stop evolution cannot be adopted by people. In fact, if stopping evolution was the key, why did God become enthralled with humans in the first place?

1.2.5. More Life: “the Great Work begins”

However, trying to share this story with Belize leaves Prior more isolated, as the experienced nurse can only conceive this divine encounter as some form of hallucinatory episode. The person who believes Prior’s encounter with the Angel to be a realistic possibility is Hannah Pitt, Joe’s mother who came to New York from Salt Lake City because she is worried after her son’s coming out phone call. Through Hannah’s encounter with Prior, the show represents the potential for social change and acceptance that affective relational dynamics can carry. When the character of Hannah Pitt first appears in the narrative, she is portrayed as a very stern mother, with a cold personality, full of fervour for the Church of the Latter-Day Saints and in absolute denial of her son’s homosexuality. Nonetheless, when she meets Prior, burning with fever, she takes him into the hospital and, as they begin to talk and develop a connection, Hannah’s vision of homosexuality as the sinful concept she knew, begins to change because she connects with the humanity and frailty in Prior. When the pair is together at the hospital, we can see how pre-judgments of ‘the Other’ can exist for the marginalized community too. Hannah tells Prior “You can’t imagine the things in my head. You don’t make assumptions about me, mister. And I won’t make them about you.” (Nichols, Ep. 6, 00:05:32)

When Prior cries in fear of his debilitating condition and admits he is scared of getting worse and facing the harshest realities of his illness, he shows her a large K.S. lesion on his chest:

Prior: See? That’s not human. That’s why I run. Wouldn’t you? Wouldn’t anybody?

Hannah: It’s a cancer, nothing more. Nothing more human than that. (Nichols, Ep. 6 00:08:00)

By making Prior see the humanity in himself, Hannah sees it too, and therefore she grasps the humanity in the gay community. This view overpowers the menace they pose to morality and family values. In fact, it is noteworthy that Hannah found this connection and humanity outside the family, as she empathises with Prior in a way that she was not capable of doing with her son. The visual representation of Hannah's character development from a strict Mormon, who finds her son's homosexuality ridiculous, to someone who can emotionally connect with another gay man, shows what affective connections can do for the acceptance of "the Other". In turn, Prior feels comforted in Hannah's presence. Further empathy ties with the audience⁹ are created as well, hoping that with the emotional connection to the characters, the reality of 'the Other' can be perceived and embraced with a new acceptance.

Hannah stays with Prior, witnessing the Angel's second visit, now in a wrathful mood. Unlike the Angel's first visit, this encounter is not sexually charged with pleasure for Prior, as he wrestles with the Angel, unwilling to ascend to Heaven as the vessel for the Prophecy. Prior is offered the chance to stay in Heaven, free of disease among the celestial creatures, waiting for the return of God. Facing this possibility, however, Prior refuses to be the Prophet of doom, the advocate for abandoning social progress, and returns the Book of Prophecy to the Angels. The physical appearance of the Angels at the Concilium is visually striking as they are now presented as more human than divine. They do not have the celestial robes or wings that the Angel of America once had; they are dressed in regular clothes, rattling through paperwork at their desks, like office clerks. More importantly, they all have familiar faces. The Angel Asiatica is Hannah, the Angel Oceania is Belize, the Angel Europa is Joe, and the Angel Australia is Louis. With this choice in the representation of these characters, ordinary and flawed people are transposed to a dimension of the divine and the holy, and characters that represent 'the Other', the abject and marginalized, are portrayed as divine entities. The emotional connection that the viewer had with the human characters is now transferred to these angels that require Prior's help, abandoned in their divinity. There is an angel for each continent as the troubles that *Angels in America* portray are growing globally. Prior speaking: "We can't just stop. We're not rocks. Progress, migration, motion is modernity. It's animate. It's what

⁹ Twenty years after the theatre premiere of *Angels in America*, Ellen McLaughlin, who originated the role of Angel, recalls one Mormon audience member that came to the actor playing Prior and said "Everything in my training, every school that I've been too, the Mormon church, at home, everybody has trained me to hate you. And I love you." (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sGSETCmLOYw> – Accessed on 10 March 2021)

living things do. We desire. Even if all we desire is stillness, it's still desire for. Even if we go faster than we should, we can't wait. And wait for what? God?" (Nichols, Ep. 6, 00:45:00)

As Prior refuses to settle for death, the audience can see the difficulties of living with HIV/AIDS, both physically and emotionally, and the isolation that the condition imposes on patients of a community that already faces isolation from society in so many ways. Prior represents the gay community's refusal to be silenced and deprived of rights. Even if it means being sick, Prior chooses life.

At the end of the series, five years have passed since Prior's diagnosis, Harper left for San Francisco, Hannah is now a New Yorker and maintains a friendship with Prior, Louis and Belize. The final scene ends with this community of friends sitting at the feet of the statue of the angel Bethesda¹⁰, Prior's favourite place in Central Park. They speak in a tone that is hopeful yet politically charged with the gay community's fight for belonging and for visibility in the U.S., refusing to stall progress in civil rights and social transformation. Prior speaking: "This disease will be the end of many of us, but not nearly all, and the dead will be commemorated and will struggle on with the living, and we are not going away. We won't die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come." (Nichols, Ep. 6, 01:07:18)

As has been previously stated in this thesis, the question of citizenship and the pursuit of a feeling of belonging is a common theme to the selected visual narratives and will be more closely explored in the next chapter.

1.3. The Normal Heart

The other visual narrative selected for affective reading in this thesis is *The Normal Heart* (2014), the HBO telefilm based on Larry Kramer's 1985 play of the same title. I would like to begin my analysis by borrowing Tony Kushner's thoughts on Kramer's work:

[Kramer's plays] contain hidden depths and complexities, to be sure, but in both plays beats one great heart aflame with one grand overwhelming desire: to use dramatic literature and

¹⁰ Also called the Angel of the Waters, the statue refers to Healing the paralytic at Bethesda, a story from the Gospel of John about an angel blessing the Pool of Bethesda and giving it healing powers. (<https://www.nycgovparks.org/news/daily-plant?id=15031> – Accessed on 28 March 2021)

the stage to get at truth, at *a* truth (...) engaged with practice, *praxis*, truth that is shaped by and shapes lived experience, truth that is changed by and changes the world. (Kushner viii)

The differences between this story and *Angels in America* are striking; while *Angels* ravel with fantastical themes, *The Normal Heart* is rooted in blatant realism, unafraid to present raw depictions of the scourge of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The violence in these representations emerges through the use of simple yet strong language and visual features, in a period spanning from 1981 until 1985. Although names have been changed, it is an autobiographical depiction of Kramer's life at the beginning of the epidemic, and many real people related with the activism generated by the HIV/AIDS spread are included in the work, contrasting Kushner's fictionalized versions of real people in *Angels*.

The main character, Alexander "Ned" Weeks, is a version of Larry Kramer himself, who, with *The Normal Heart*, was able to create a story about the gay community through representations of love and normalization of monogamous same-sex coupledness in favour of long-term commitment. Kramer thus distanced himself and some of his characters from associations with the stereotypical views of oversexualization of the gay male life. Though some representations of oversexed lifestyles appear in Kramer's work, they pose as a surface from which to draw responsibility for the impact and spreading of HIV/AIDS. As Kushner explains in his 2014 introduction¹¹ to Kramer's work, this choice for representation was susceptible to criticism from radical queer theorists who believed that approximation to prescribed monogamic relationships (akin to the enforced heterosexual form) are another form of assimilation and subjugation of the community. However, I align my position and my choice for the analysis of Kramer's work with Kushner's interpretation that "Kramer is telling us *we must save ourselves*. He is forcefully reminding us that being the object of hatred for millennia will make any subject hate her- or himself." (Kushner xxii) Kramer exposes the ignorance and fear surrounding the community not through fracture with society, but through emotional approximation and connection, and by adopting a critical lens which the gay community may utilise to see itself.

¹¹ In 2013, Kramer joined *Angels in America* playwright Tony Kushner, during the run of New York Historical's exhibition 'AIDS in New York: The First Five Years'. They discussed Kramer's legacy and the enduring relevance of *The Normal Heart*. Coincidentally, the program took place on the day the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the Defense of Marriage Act, a major step on the way to full marriage equality. (<https://behindthescenes.nyhistory.org/history-home-larry-kramer-tony-kushner-normal-heart/> – Accessed on 18 May 2021)

This film does not shy away from representing darker sides of the gay community, exhibiting sexual depictions more openly. Unlike *Angels in America*, *The Normal Heart* does not rely on metaphors or fantastical themes, and the visual elements, alongside the textual narrative, convey a different neutrality, and even objectiveness, to the construction of the film. This neutrality is in turn what can shape or give way to the viewer's emotional and affective conclusions. This neutrality in directing, music, and visual elements allow for the affecting of the viewer to what appears on-screen, looking *with* and not *at* the characters. (Darragh and Greene 4). This enables the audience to experience what Barthes called the "hyperconsciousness of the affective minimum, of the microscopic fragment of emotion" (101), which is to be attentive to the changeability and smallest shifts of affective moments as they are depicted on screen. These depictions can thereby perform some effect on the viewer as they become aware of the affective shifts within themselves. This is fundamental to keep in mind when considering the relational dynamic aspect of affect, and the potential of film work to function as a place for the creation of empathy and affect the viewer.

1.3.1. Feeling mighty real

The film begins with a tone that will be conflicting throughout the narrative. The opening scene is set at Fire Island, an oasis of gay sexual freedom, and it exposes an oversexed community. This scene actually plays an antithetical role in a film about the primordial ravage of the HIV/AIDS epidemic that began in the U.S. in 1981. This exposure of the oversexualization of the community could be dangerous to present to conservative and, potentially, homophobic audiences when the main intention would be to alert to the injustices in the treatment of this community, both in terms of healthcare and social prejudice. However, the narrative builds upon a counternarrative that is created against that first scene – the character of Ned Weeks fights off the preconceived temptation to associate the HIV/AIDS crisis with the stereotype of the oversexualization and promiscuity of the gay community. The film represents instead a multi-layered community that is capable of experiencing love in monogamous and committed relationships. More than that, the narrative weaved by Kramer shows that even those who decide to express their sexual freedom in a more flagrant way should still have the same social and political rights. They should also not be denied the full expression of their sexuality, neither be subject to moral judgments dictating the availability and quality of healthcare when assessing the effects of illness.

Visually, the scenes at Fire Island also provide sensory contrast to the rest of the film, as these scenes along with others of more blatant sexual encounters, have a very vivid 1980s aesthetic. They are set to upbeat disco music and stand out against other aspects of the narrative, set to more sombre tones and softer musical scores. The different visual representations of the male body in *The Normal Heart* serve to affect the audience's gaze and perception of both the gay body dealing with HIV/AIDS and the healthy gay body. Scenes that take place at parties in Fire Island or at a gay sauna, for example, display the bodies erotically; the men at Fire Island are concerned about their looks, shaving their bodies while wearing small speedos, whereas at parties and at the beach they are semi-naked or completely naked, enthralled by each other in a more openly sexual atmosphere. To examine this representation of the male body in the early 1980s, I adopt Frank Mort's perspective as he looked into the representation of the sexualized male body in the same period: Mort notes that the sexual meanings at play are linked to narcissistic display – a visual erotica – that does not completely abandon the macho image of strength and virility, as the cult of perfecting the body was fomented by a desire for manliness. As Mort further argues, these are representations of bodies to be looked at by oneself and others (Mort 201). Furthermore, the more erotic scenes in *The Normal Heart* give us an example of male sexual representation that is seldom seen in mainstream U.S. film: the engagement of the male body (though mainly the white body) in erotic and sexual behaviour with other men.

At the parties in Fire Island, where libidinous images of semi-naked and naked men abound, Ned feels out of place, experiencing discomfort amongst his peers. Ned believes that “having so much sex makes finding love impossible” (Murphy, 00:03:21) and it is implied that due to some of his views he ends up having difficulties in integration with other members of the community. This struggle to fully fit in with his companions is present throughout the entire film, even when he creates the Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC)¹², in order to reach out to people and political representatives with the hope to fund research for a cure for the then-unknown disease. Ned's outspokenness for equality and for the necessity of research funding to save the gay community from HIV/AIDS is not immediately well-accepted by his friends. Ned's fight for rights does not stand amidst open manifestations of sexual desire but rather in his vocalization of the need for equal treatment and the appeal to collective action. Ned wants

¹² This non-profit volunteer-supported and community-based organization, that was the first service organization for HIV positive people still exists under the mission “End AIDS. Live Life” (<https://www.gmhc.org> – Accessed on 14 March 2021). Kramer was also a founder of the group ACT UP, in 1987, committed to end the AIDS crisis (<https://actupny.org> – Accessed on 14 March 2021).

the gay community to fight, engage politically, and also to take sexual precaution and responsibility. To Ned, it is very clear from the start that the fight against HIV/AIDS must depend on the community, as he tells Bruce “We have to do something. No one else will.” (Murphy, 00:12:26). Despite the uncertainty and lack of information about the new disease, the scarce evidence at the time, along with the rapid surging of cases among gay men in New York, pointed to sexual transmission, but Dr Emma Brookner’s prescription for the gays to “cool it off” is met with contempt from the community.

Indeed, at a time when evidence about the modes of transmission of the HIV virus was lacking, gay men’s resistance to prescribed sexual restraint was supported by the refusal to remain silenced and subordinate to the heteronormative society. Although gay and lesbian movements originated with the sexual revolution, public-sphere debate over sex was not mainly concerned with non-heterosexual identities. The gay movement reached its peak of social engagement due to the HIV/AIDS crisis, in a way in which other forms of disease and death became the defining issue for new generations entering into sexuality (Berlant pp. 15-16). Furthermore, the resistance to the impositions of sexual restraint were met with resistance as the gay community struggled to face the fact that the sexual freedom they had been fighting for was the cause of their demise. “Cooling it off” would give a larger margin to moralists in assuming that gays are the ones to blame for the virus, again strengthening views of a moral disease whose only responsibility belonged to the gay community. This is vocalized by the character of Mickey, who worked in the city’s Department of Health, a job threatened by Hiram Keebler of Mayor Koch’s office after he holds a meeting with the GMHC denying the mayor’s support to the organization;

Mickey: You think I am killing people?

Ned: That is not what I said.

Mickey. It is, you’ve said it! I’ve spent 15 years of my life fighting for our right to be free and to make love wherever, whenever, and you’re telling me all those years of what being gay stood for is wrong and I’m a murderer! We have been so oppressed, don’t you remember? Can’t you see how important it is for us to love openly without hiding, without guilt? (*voice breaking*) Why can’t you see that? (Murphy, 1:27:16)

What at first appeared as resistance for the sake of promiscuity alone is later made explicit as being in fact resistance and refusal to hide and assume a guilt they did not have, since they had fought for equality for so long.

Ned's character and his interaction with others is also representative of the different forms that activist fight may take within the same group, and how different possibilities of action are presented to different *strati* of the community. When Ned meets Dr Emma Brookner, a character based on the real Dr Linda Laubenstein, she urges him to take his position as an outspoken gay writer as a platform to publicly denounce what is happening to the gay community and engage the community in the fight against the unknown disease. Emma's own body was permanently conditioned by the polio virus when she was a child, leaving her bound to a wheelchair throughout her whole life. When Ned asks her if having a big mouth is a symptom of the virus, she replies that "it's a cure". As Emma and Ned's attempts to lead the other men into making sense of the danger of the new disease falter, frustration begins to grow and so does the strain in Ned's relationship with other members of the GMHC, expressed through Mickey and Bruce. Ned then struggles to deal with the others' less vocal and aggressive behaviour towards the combat of the illness.

Ned's struggle to fit in has always been a part of his life, as implied in Ned's relationship with his brother, Ben. In youth, Ned spent years in therapy and even tried to commit suicide due to his sexual identity. Even though Ben feels protective over his younger brother, the character represents the conservative American community that fears 'the Other' and wants to distance itself from what is deemed as immoral behaviour:

Ben: Gays in leather, chains, dresses, high heels. I say to myself, 'this isn't Ned'.

Ned: You know the media always dramatizes the most extreme.

Ben: You guys have a dreadful image problem.

Ned: That's why it's so important to have people like you supporting us. You already have your dignity. (Murphy, 00:51:10)

What Kramer accomplishes once again with this dialogue is to appeal to the audience's sensibilities by exposing through the voice of a heterosexual man conservative views that cling to stereotypical representations of radical aspects of the gay community, while at the same time

affect the gay audience, claiming accountability for action to engage with those representations and normalise them.

Ben, however, can see Ned in a distanced way from the clichés and stereotypes of leather, feminization and queerness only by shutting down any relation to the sexuality in Ned's identity, almost as if Ned's homosexuality was inexistent:

Ben: In every area I consider important, you have my support.

Ned: The only area that I consider important I don't have your support at all. In some place, deep inside you, you still think I'm sick, don't you?

Ben: I think you've adjusted to life pretty well. (Murphy, 00:51:39)

The point to be made is not a consideration that Ned should display sexual or intimate details of his life in order to make Ben more aware of all aspects of his identity – the point to be made is that by implying that Ned's sexuality is not of importance, Ben erases his accountability for Ned's history of struggle with self-acceptance, which caused him to have spent years in therapy looking for a cure. Furthermore, by disregarding the importance of that aspect of Ned's identity, Ben erases the necessity for higher visibility of the impacts of HIV/AIDS and also the community's struggle for equal rights and treatment, as only by acknowledging, instead of ignoring that sexual identity matters, can one identify the social and political problems that arise from sexual difference. Even though sexuality can be regarded as an aspect of intimacy, when it comes to deprive a group of social and political rights and it becomes a cause for strife, it transposes the private barriers, turning sexuality into a very public issue. The relation of sexuality to political sphere will be more closely examined in the next chapter, as I explore how the films engage the notion of intimate citizenship.

Ben's claim that Ned has adjusted to life is ambiguous. By considering that Ned has managed to adapt to life, there is an implication of an underlying condition that demands adaptation to the correct way to live up to social norms, which stresses the marginalization of members of the community by building upon the notion that they must perform according to what is expected by society's rigid values, as to not disturb the social order:

Ned: I am the same as you. Just say it. Say it.

(pause)

Ben: No. You're not. I'm not gonna say it.

Ned: Every time I lose this fight it hurts more.

(...)

Ben: (*shouting*) Agreeing that you were born just the same as I was born isn't gonna save your dying friends!

Ned: (*shouting*) That is exactly what is going to save my dying friends! (...) I am furious with you and every god damned doctor who made me feel it was sick to love a man! (...) I will not speak to you again until you accept me as your equal! Your healthy equal! Your brother! (Murphy, 00:54:08)

Appealing to his brother to see the humanity in him and to be treated as his equal, Ned's words are an appeal for equality to the audience in the same way. Even though Ned tells Ben that he is the most important person in his life, Ben still thinks of Ned as being sick because he associates homosexuality with a mental condition, which in turn makes Ned inferior to Ben. Due to his disregard of the importance of Ned's sexuality, Ben also believes that his love for his brother is unchanged whether he sees Ned as his equal or not. However, in Ned's words the appeal to equality serves to lead Ben (and the audience) to rethink how perceptions of difference and fear of difference itself, help deepen discrimination against the community and further its marginalization. Ben has his own interior struggle, though – to support his brother but finding it difficult to see Ned as his equal, due to deep-rooted prejudice. In fact, mirroring Louis's and Prior's embrace away from Louis's family in *Angels*, we can see Ben's discomfort in hugging Ned in the street, after Ned asks for help from Ben's law firm. Either because of hugging another man publicly or because of hugging a gay man – even if it is his brother – this scene shows Ben's (and conservative straight men's) fragility in displaying affection towards another man. This will only fade away when Ben witnesses the most extreme test to Ned and Felix's affects: their exchange of wedding vows as the realization of their love on Felix's dying bed.

1.3.2. “Men do not naturally not love”

In the pursuit of someone who can help him reach a bigger audience to raise awareness to the new virus, Ned meets Felix Turner. Felix is a gay journalist who works for *The New York Times*,

who writes about “gay designers, and gay discos, and gay chefs, and gay models, and gay rock stars, and gay celebrities, and gay everything. I just don’t call them gay.” (Murphy, 00:16:46). Felix tells Ned he cannot write a piece for *The Times* about AIDS as that would jeopardize his career. At the same time, this piece of dialogue calls attention to the visibility of a community that must remain anonymous, as acknowledging that those designers, chefs, models, and rock stars are gay would imply diminishing the value of their endeavours.

When Ned and Felix have their first date, Felix tells Ned that they have met before, at a sauna where they had an anonymous sexual encounter, of which Ned has no recollection. This explains how Ned’s struggle for self-acceptance and self-love, which made him believe it was impossible to be loved, led him to recur to anonymous and meaningless sex. “Men do not naturally not love. They learn not to” (Murphy, 00:28:00), Felix tells Ned, meaning simultaneously that they can have a second chance to get to know each other better, but also that prejudice is socially constructed and taught.

Yet, if men learn not to love, they can learn to love again and be less prejudiced against those who strive for acceptance – that is the intent behind Kramer’s writing. The depiction of sexual intercourse between the pair after this is very different if compared to the sexual encounter Felix recalls at the sauna, anonymous and rough in a dark room, in a rapid succession of images set to disco music – Ned was not even able to open his eyes and told Felix his name was Alexander (his full name). When the couple has sex in Ned’s apartment after their first date, the scene is set to soft music, the couple touches affectuously and softly, kissing, and there is a visible tear running down Felix’s face. When the scene is over, they remain embracing in bed, naked, as Ned shares with Felix stories from his past, about therapy and how he tried to fight his homosexuality. After that, the pair develops a romantic relationship which helps Ned begin to feel acceptance and belonging. From then on, the couple is represented in scenes of peaceful romantic partnership and intimate domesticity: laying on the couch together eating ice cream from the package, Ned tells Felix “I have been waiting for a lover like you my whole life” (Murphy, 00:36:06). They dance together at a fundraising ball for the GMHC, set to the sound of Billie Holiday’s “The Man I Love”, sang by a gay male choir. The song prolongs into a scene where Ned gets down on one knee and asks Felix to move in – the closest possibility at the time to marriage in a gay partnership.

These scenes in the film are important due to the normalisation they convey in the representation of affective attachments in gay relationships. These depictions rely on the

reservoir of figures – the “image-repertoire” – on which amorous subjects can build upon, a concept elaborated by Roland Barthes in *A Lover’s Discourse*, as “an encyclopaedia of affective culture” (7), in order to affect the audience. According to Barthes, a figure is established if at least someone can say: “That’s so true! I recognize that scene of language” (4) in recognition of amorous feeling; thus, considering this idea of recognition of a figure of love or emotion which cannot be defined in a heteronormative framework, the depiction of homoaffective love scenes can create affective proximity to audiences that share the same affective language codes.

It is through this use of the image-repertoire of affective figures that we can witness the emotional change in Ben’s character development. After years of not speaking to Ned, Ben is contacted by Felix to arrange for his will, as by the end of the film Felix is dying due to AIDS-related complications. After he collapses in the street and Ben rushes him to the hospital, a surprised Ned embraces his brother and they both cry.

In the cold light of the hospital room, Emma officiates a symbolic marriage between Felix and Ned, which Ben witnesses. In a time when gay marriage was not even close to becoming a possibility, this couple’s exchange of vows, appropriating the linguistic references used in the institution of marriage subverts their exclusivity to heterosexual coupledness, which invites empathy. Retrieving Barthes’s notion, the viewer can recognize the ritual and the language. Felix is very debilitated, reaching the final moments of his life, struggling to even speak. The four characters present in the room are either crying or holding back tears:

Emma: We are gathered here in the sight of God to join together these two men. They love each other very much and want to be married in the presence of their family and friends. I see no objection. (*pause*) Do you, Felix Turner, take Ned Weeks –

Felix: Alexander. Yeah.

Emma: To be your...

Felix: My great true love. I do. Yeah

Ned: I do. I do. I do. I do. I do. I do. (*they kiss, both crying*) (Murphy, 1:58:26)

Ned is not scared or repulsed by Felix’s terminally sick body, kissing and holding him, and Ben is able to witness this concretization of love in a moment of ultimate equality – death.

1.3.3. “The only living boy in New York”

As already exposed, *The Normal Heart* presents some fundamental differences when compared to the previous object of analysis, *Angels in America*. However, the theme of experiencing love and intimacy whilst dealing with HIV/AIDS and the sick body is common to both narratives; the difference here lies in the representation of different affective responses to the same hardship. Similarly to Prior and Louis, Ned and Felix represent a serodifferent (or serodiscordant) couple, which means that one member of the couple is HIV-positive while the other is HIV-negative (GMFA), but Kushner and Kramer present the viewer with opposite possibilities of reaction to living with the same condition. While Louis’s fear of the accelerated debilitation of Prior’s health and body became overwhelming and made him abandon the relationship, Ned makes the hope of recovery for Felix his main focus to continue the fight for political and social support against the disease, never considering to break-up with Felix.

Two scenes are striking in their similarities and I will examine them both. Firstly, the confession scenes, which is to say the scenes where the infected partner informs the other about his condition:

Ned: If I had it, would you leave me?

Felix: I don’t know. Would you if I did?

Ned: No. (Murphy, 1:02:00)

While Ned asks the question hypothetically, when Felix asks it, he is already aware that he is infected, scared of the possibility that Ned will not be able to cope with his condition and leave. Ned’s answer, however, is immediate, certain that he would not walk out on Felix. This reaction highly contrasts Louis’s reaction to Prior’s revelation of his diagnosis, as well as the subsequent conversations when Prior realizes that Louis is potentially not able to endure the hardship presented upon them. In each narrative there is one striking scene in which the audience can witness the opposite affective responses of both Louis and Ned to their partners’ deteriorating health condition. Witnessing Prior collapsing on the floor, sweating with high fever, in pain and defecating blood, Louis falls into despair and claims for help. However, in *The Normal Heart*, as Felix’s health deteriorates, Ned comes home to find him in the bathroom, after seeing that he has soiled the bed. There is no spilled blood, like in *Angels*, but there is the image of faeces on the sheets, toilet paper spread across the floor, leading a trail to a skinny K.S. covered Felix,

sitting on the toilet. Opposed to Louis' reaction to Prior's failing body, Ned's internal monologue, which the viewer can hear as voice-off, demonstrates the will to care for his lover:

Ned: Once upon a time, there was a little boy who always wanted to love another little boy. One day he finally found that love, and it was wonderful. I'm supposed to use gloves. I'm supposed to do this. I'm supposed to do that. I'm supposed to not kiss him. (*Ned kisses Felix on the head*) I'm not supposed to be only 45 years old and taking care of a 35 year old young man who is 100 years old and dying. Emma calls it a seesaw. He is fine, he gets sick. He gets better, he gets sicker. He's afraid I'll leave him. I told him I wouldn't leave him, that I never for one second would think of leaving him, but he doesn't believe me. It's hard to believe in much these days. But we must never stop believing in each other. I'm a mess, that's what I am. You cry and you cry until you think you can't cry anymore. And then you cry some more. Not only for yourself or Felix, but for all the little boys who finally found their other little boys they've wanted all their lives, now that they're men. (Murphy, 1:20:00)

This monologue is voiced over Ned's kissing Felix gently on the head, as Felix is crying sitting on the toilet, while Ned helps him get cleaned up and shower, and Ned changes the sheets and washes them, crying alone in the building's laundry room. Ned does not fall into despair, he does not show any frustration towards Felix and he reinstates that he would never consider leaving Felix because he has AIDS, or that he is put off by the physical deterioration that comes with the disease's impact on the body and its constraints on physical intimacy. The depicted intimacy between the couple transforms the on-screen experience going almost effortlessly from sexual to a level of intimacy based on caretaking for the sick partner, highly contrasting with the representation of the impact the illness has on Prior and Louis in *Angels*.

The only moment where we can see tension building up between Ned and Felix due to the couple's struggle with AIDS is during their fight at the beach house. Coming home carrying groceries, Ned finds Felix curled up on the floor, because he fell and could not get up. As Ned tries to help him, Felix scoffs and flinches: "Don't touch me. God. I hate it when you look at me" (1:44:45). Ned dismisses this and changes the subject to something banal, like cooking dinner. Felix, however, seems invested in picking a fight, saying that maybe Ned was the carrier who infected him. Ned remains patient as he says: "We don't have to do this to each other. You're gonna get better, Felix." (Murphy, 1:45:12). However, as Felix maintains a dismissive attitude towards Ned's hopeful speech, while eating a candy bar, Ned's patience begins to fade:

Ned: We have to hope.

Felix: Oh, do we? And how am I supposed to do that?

(Ned looks at Felix with a very sad expression. Felix takes a bite of a candy bar)

Ned: Stop eating that shit!

Felix: No!

Ned: You know how important it is to watch your nutrition!

Felix: I have a life expectancy of ten more minutes. I'll eat what I want to eat. (Murphy, 1:45:50)

Felix's defiant attitude visibly changes into deep sadness, as tears start streaming down his face and he tells Ned how he is getting worse and does not want to force Ned to see it. The affective charges between the two characters fluctuate almost to extremes during this scene. Felix is so frightened of his condition and so focused on his imminent death that he is willing to give up on taking care of himself, showing how he is almost ashamed of Ned seeing him in such state. Which is why he is acting up. In turn, Ned refuses to let Felix give up and die, and becomes frustrated as he feels he is the only one fighting for Felix's health.

Ned: Are you gonna sit there on the floor for the rest of your life? Do you hear me?

Felix: Do you hear me?

Ned: No!

Felix: No? I've had over forty treatments! No? I've had three... no, four kinds of chemo. No! (...) Emma has spent more time on me than anyone else, and it hasn't done a thing! You cannot force the goddamn sun to come out.

Ned: I am so sick of fighting and everybody's stupidity and blindness and guilt trips. If you can't eat the food, don't eat the food. I don't care. Take your poison! I don't care! (Murphy, 1:46:30)

As Ned begins to unpack the groceries, describing all the nutritious food he bought, he starts throwing them against Felix, sitting on the floor against the wall. Fish, vegetables, broccoli, all flying and splattering on the wall, covering Felix in bits of food. It culminates with Ned

throwing a package of milk that bursts as it hits the wall, leaving Felix drenched in spilled milk. Very angrily, flipping a table, Ned shouts: “Do you want to die, Felix? Die!” (Murphy, 1:46:57).

Echoing Tony Kushner’s words on his introduction to the printed version of *The Normal Heart*, Kramer’s drama is almost antipoetical; the text, unlike Kushner’s *Angels*, has only one symbolic and metaphorical moment – the spilled milk – which gains much of its power from its absolute isolation. This metaphorical moment, that travelled from the play to the film adaptation, is an image, not a figure of speech, of language (Kushner viii). It is a moment of intense emotion in action, where the visual aspect contributes to the affective impact on the viewer.

Ned’s frustration subsides instantly, overcome by deep sorrow. He cuddles up to Felix’s knees, in a childlike position, crying and pleading to Felix: “Please don’t leave me”. They remain embracing over the spoiled food and the spilled milk.

Despite its focus on the strength of romantic love to overcome HIV/AIDS intimate troubles, Kramer’s narrative strategy ends up following Thomas Waugh’s notion that “narrative denouements, far from celebrating union, posit separation, loss, displacement, sometimes death, and, at the very most, open-endedness” (434). Although Ned and Felix can celebrate their love in a performed wedding, Felix dies. *The Normal Heart* paints a picture of separation, death, and loss of loved ones, showing that many times living with AIDS, and living as a gay man, means learning to endure loss.

1.3.4. “K.S., baby: the wine-dark kiss of the angel of death”

In both *The Normal Heart* and in *Angels in America*, the disclosure of illness comes with the revealing of a K.S. lesion, which allows for a visibility of HIV/AIDS through one of its most distinct physical features. This aspect is very important in the choice to examine the screen adaptations of Kushner and Kramer’s works from their plays, as the visual element is heightened on screen when transposed from its original written form. In this topic, we can observe a parallel with Jonathan Demme’s *Philadelphia*. In Demme’s work, it is the K.S. lesion in Andrew Beckett’s¹³ forehead that exposes his health condition to the other older associates at the law firm, thus causing them to orchestrate the consequent manoeuvres to fire him. As

¹³ Tom Hanks won the Academy Award for Best Actor in a Leading Role for his portrayal of Andrew Beckett, in *Philadelphia*.

Andrew fights in court against the questionable motives behind his sacking, the audience can visualise, particularly due to the worsening of the lesions, that his health is rapidly deteriorating. Although he is winning on court, he is losing the battle with AIDS.

The time period framed in *The Normal Heart* is the beginning of the ravage of HIV/AIDS in the U.S., a time when the virus causes and ways of transmission were unknown to the civil and scientific communities, a few years before the narrative in *Angels in America* begins. However, this physical imprint of the illness remains relevant throughout the period depicted in both works.

As previously stated in this chapter, the disclosure of a diagnostic of infection in both narratives is introduced with the revelation of a K.S. lesion. This aesthetic effect adds to the dramatic emotional charge of the revelation by providing the viewer with a visual feature which they can associate with all the victims of the disease that appear on screen, thus creating a form of visual identification for members of the same community. This bodily imprint unites all those who exhibit it into a community of pariahs – a ‘scarlet letter’, as it were, now turned into a mark of imminent death caused by a disease associated to immoral behaviour. This feature is particularly striking in *The Normal Heart*. As Ned begins his activist work to claim for action from the Government and the medical community, he passes a store window with posters saying: “GAY CANCER (*underlined*) Something awful is going on out there guys! This is what it looks like”. These sentences are accompanied by drawn arrows pointing to photographs of male bodies covered in K.S. lesions and subtitles with symptomatic information. This association of the K.S. lesions with the new form of ‘gay cancer’ helped to legitimize the notion that HIV/AIDS was a disease exclusive to the gay community, furthering social stigma and discrimination. More than posing as a moral threat, this community imposed a health liability to U.S. society.

Regardless of its stigmatizing impact, this visual focus on K.S. lesions functions as a guide that allows for the viewer to anticipate who is infected and the fate of each character – when K.S. lesions become bigger and more numerous it indicates that the patient’s health condition is deteriorating; as Prior seems to have the disease under control, in the epilogue of *Angels in America*, not showing any visible marks. In opposition, when Albert and Felix perish in *The Normal Heart*, both are overridden with lesions all over their bodies. In fact, even as he is unsure of the connection between K.S. and HIV/AIDS, Albert tries to conceal his lesions with make-up for he reckons that if he is infected he won’t get hired for more modelling work, saying

“if I can’t work, I just as soon be dead” (Murphy, 00:37:35) Bruce is also afraid to kiss him when the bodily marks appear, once again showing the toll that disease takes on intimate relationships.

Felix’s bodily transformation¹⁴ is evident as time progresses. One of the character’s distinctive traits is his good looks, paired with his position as a style and events journalist for *The New York Times*. However, after his diagnosis, Felix’s body gradually loses its characteristic beauty, as he loses weight, his teeth become darker, and he walks with a cain, becoming a shadow of his former self. Felix’s own confrontation with his new status comes during a subway ride. When he tries to avoid another passenger’s inquisitive look, he sees a man with big lesions all over his face and neck, a very pale complexion and in almost cadaveric shape. Seeing this man, Felix perceives the evolution of his own deteriorating body which already shows visible K.S. lesions on his thinned face, an impact he tries to minimize under his wool cap. Moreover, Felix, who at the sauna caught looks for his physical appeal, is now confronted with his integration in? this community that casts judgemental and fearful glances from other people. The visibility of the K.S. lesions is synonymous with fear and shame on those who have them on their body and those who look at them – fear of contracting the illness and touching those who have it; and shame of being associated with the community, or being exposed once you are infected.

Notwithstanding, the visibility of the K.S. lesions in each visual work gives way to the construction of distinct meanings. Since these marks weigh on their holders can be demoralizing and a visual reminder of their status, they can also be, in the eyes of others, a reminder of humanity. Emma, for instance, is not afraid to touch her patients who exhibit this symptom, and it is upon seeing Prior’s lesions that Hannah Pitt claims to seeing his condition as deeply human. This visibility of the lesions ultimately has a humbling effect.

1.3.5. “Cardboard tombstones bound together with a rubber band”

If *Angels in America* succeeded in the representation of grief experienced as an interior state, *The Normal Heart* is able to give visibility to the collective casualties caused by HIV/AIDS, not only through the historical allusions to the increasing numbers of deaths as the years pass

¹⁴ Matt Bomer, who plays Felix Turner, won the Golden Globe for Best Performance by an Actor in a Supporting Role, much due to his physical investment in the portrayal of a patient dying from AIDS complications.

by, but through the specific representation on screen of gay grief. Gay grief gets its specificity from being a form of feeling or an emotion that is not permitted to be fully experienced. As Sara Ahmed explains:

Queer histories tell us of inescapable injustices, for example, when gay or lesbian mourners are not recognised as mourners in hospitals, by families, in law courts. (...) As such, homosexuality becomes an ‘ungrievable loss’, which returns to haunt the heterosexual subject through its melancholic identification with that which has been permanently cast out.”¹⁵ (155)

This melancholic identification that Ahmed refers is where the affective appeal to larger audiences works in *The Normal Heart*, alerting to the need for normalizing homoaffective relationships whose lack of equal rights perpetuates from life to death, for “the failure to recognise queer loss *as* loss is also a failure to recognise queer relationships as significant bonds, or that queer lives are lives worth living” (Ahmed 156).

When Bruce’s boyfriend, Albert, dies, Bruce tells Ned about all the difficulties faced to provide Albert with some dignity in his dying moments when they fly to Phoenix to reunite Albert with his mother: from the pilot who refuses to fly the plane they are in, to the cabin crew and the other passengers’ attitude towards Albert. He dies when they get to the hospital. The doctors refuse to examine him and give him a cause of death, and without a death certificate neither the undertakers nor the police will take him. Albert is put into a garbage bag and dumped in the alley, like trash. Albert’s death is dehumanized, as neither is he recognized as a casualty by the authorities, nor are his mother and boyfriend allowed to mourn him or provide him with a dignified funeral, when every person that provides some assistance is just looking for a way to profit from their situation. Echoing Ahmed’s words, it is as if Albert’s life, and the lives it represents, are devoid of meaning or value – they are closer to be considered disposable lives.

There is however a particularly successful visuality of grief and the claim of visibility to the HIV/AIDS victims as actual loss of lives that comes through the character of Tommy Boatwright and his collection of Rolodex cards:

¹⁵ As Ann Cvetkovich puts it: “The AIDS crisis, like other traumatic encounters with death, has challenged our strategies for remembering the dead, forcing the invention of new forms of mourning and commemoration” (427). An example of such collective mourning generated through the activism around AIDS is the Name Project Quilt, which sought to make present the loss of queer lives within public culture. (Ahmed 156)

Tommy: I have this tradition. It's something I do now when a friend dies. I save his Rolodex card. What am I supposed to do? Throw it away in a trashcan? I won't do that. No, I won't. It's too final. Last year I had five cards. Now I have fifty. A collection of cardboard tombstones bound together with a rubber band. (Murphy, 1:15:30)

The collection of cardboard tombstones keeps growing as the narrative progresses, displayed on Tommy's desk drawer, multiplied into smaller groups of Rolodex cards, each with a name and other personal details, representing a loss human life. This visual strategy intends to have visual impact by giving names to victims and showing on screen how the ravage of HIV/AIDS quickly decimated a large number of gay lives. It conveys that if a Rolodex card would not be thrown in a trashcan, much less should a human body be disposed in an alley.

Tommy's speech goes on to claim attention to the loss of value each life added to the world by establishing a connection to the arts and the role of the gay community in artistic expression.

Tommy: We are losing an entire generation. Young men at the beginning, just gone. Choreographers, playwrights, dancers, actors. All those plays that won't get written now... All those dances never to be danced. In closing, I'm just gonna say I'm mad. I'm fucking mad. I keep screaming inside, 'Why are they letting us die? Why is no one helping us?' And here's the truth. Here's the answer. They just don't like us. (Murphy, 1:17:07)

On this scene and Tommy's monologue, there are two important points to be made: the film as site for identification of gay culture and association of the loss of gay lives with a loss in artistic expressions, and the film's depiction of death as a site of creation of affect for general viewers. For the first point, I take Thomas Waugh's argument that the gay subject often takes on recurring social roles like the artist or the intellectual (433), which is the case in this narrative. The film follows a postmodern rendition of the traditional configuration of the gay artist-intellectual and reflects the shifting sensibilities and cultural-political strategies in the face of anti-gay backlash and the epidemic (Waugh 436).

Moreover, the focus is not solely on the association of the gay community with the impact on cultural movements, but on the stories that will not get told, i.e., the lives that will be lost to HIV/AIDS. Hence, we can be led to reflect on the place of film as a site for the creation of affect in the viewer, regarding death and grief. For that, I resort to Brinkema's interpretation of Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, in which Smith suggests that due to our inability to immediately experience the feelings of others, through judgment we can only

represent to ourselves what our feelings or emotions would be if we were in a situation similar to ‘the Other’. In other words, by understanding the context of a situation, we can conceive how we would respond and therefore form an idea of how the other is affected by such a situation – that is, empathy (6). As for death in particular, Brinkema echoes Smith’s thoughts that:

[i]t is miserable, we think, to be deprived of the light of the sun; to be shut out from life and conversation; to be laid in the cold grave, a prey to corruption and the reptiles of the earth; to be no more thought of in this world, but to be obliterated, in a little time, from the affections, and almost from the memory, of their dearest friends and relations. (qtd. in Brinkema 7)

By delving deeply into the theme of death, visually representing hospitalized patients, funerals and grieving friends, families and lovers, both *Angels in America* and *The Normal Heart* function as sites for the creation of affect on the viewer and rely on fostering empathy in the viewer towards the gay community.

The Normal Heart closes in an interloping sequence of Tommy’s expanding Rolodex collection and Ned attending a dance at Yale’s Gay Week. Both scenes are intertwined with factual information regarding the evolution of the epidemic in the U.S. and the attention it received from the Government. Ned is crying as he witnesses couples of young gay men dancing in pairs, a visuality that parallels more traditional scenes of prom dances featuring heterosexual couples. Notions regarding intimate aspects as part of an integrated experience of citizenship will be explored in the next chapter, but this scene alerts to the importance of safe spaces where young gay people can fulfil experiences that are mostly exclusive to heteronormative contexts. The affective charge of the closing scenes is impacted by Ned crying, providing the glimpse of a wedding band on his finger (as he compares the experience of these younger gay men at Yale with his own) set against the ever growing number of friends dying, represented by Tommy’s cards. Felix died before he could be Ned’s date to Gay Week, and like him many others will not be able to experience any more significant gains from the Gay Rights Movement and the better care that will be available to HIV/AIDS patients in the future.

2. An intimate epidemic: the experience of citizenship in a bad dream the world is having

The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines citizenship as the:

relationship between an individual and a state to which the individual owes allegiance and in turn is entitled to its protection. Citizenship implies the status of freedom with accompanying responsibilities. Citizens have certain rights, duties, and responsibilities that are denied or only partially extended to aliens and other noncitizens residing in a country.¹⁶

At the same time, citizenship is defined as a relation among individuals who share common identities, integrating personal identity with nationality. As Lauren Berlant argues:

[P]eople are asked to love their country, and to recognize certain stories, events, experiences, practices, and ways of life as related to the core of who they are, their public status, and their resemblance to other people. This training in politicized intimacy has also served as a way of turning political boundaries into visceral, emotional, and seemingly hardwired responses of “insiders” to “outsiders.” (2007: 37)

As has been mentioned throughout the previous chapter, both *Angels in America* and *The Normal Heart* deal with questions of identity – individual and collective –, social and emotional belonging, and relations of race, gender, class and, of course, sexuality by addressing intimate issues in a way that blurs the lines between what is public and what is private.

In this chapter, I will explore more in depth how an affective visualization of these works can foster processes of identification, thus creating a sense of belonging, and how that process can engage the notions of affective and intimate citizenship. Indeed, these concepts of citizenship gain relevance with the affective visualization of these films, as we are able to explore how national and political issues impact on intimate aspects of people’s lives, and how they also affect people’s participation in the political sphere. This chapter will also discuss how *Angels* and *The Normal Heart* portray, and have also promoted, activism around the AIDS epidemic and the gay rights movement. Some characters’ plots will be more closely examined in this section in order to provide support for the application of concepts of citizenship. The goal is

¹⁶ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/citizenship> – Accessed on May 2, 2021.

then to convey how visual narratives and dramatic works can contribute to generate social empathy and potentially normalize homoaffective relationships. Alongside the issues of discrimination towards homosexuals and the health crisis caused by the ravage of HIV/AIDS in the 1980s, the films deal with racial matters, political action in the U.S. during that decade, and the representation of real people – or fictionalized versions of real people – and real activist organizations that gained power from collective mobilization.

In order to understand the relation between these visual works and the notion of intimate citizenship, it is important to understand how affective resonance with the works helps the process of identity construction or the stimulation of empathy towards ‘the Other’. The notion of the “public sphere” was introduced by Jürgen Habermas in his seminal work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), in which he explores, in a historical overview, the dissipation of boundaries between the public and the private. Simply put, the modern world has lost the distinction between the two categories as bourgeois society was able to discuss artistic and literary works publicly, creating multiple dialogues outside the private institution of the family. Hence, I build upon the idea that the dialogues that spring from *Angels in America* and *The Normal Heart* are able to shine a light on social and political issues, particularly how questions of intimacy can limit our experience of full citizenship. This has been the argument used by feminist, and later, queer studies in discussing citizenship.

Narrative imagination and storytelling are important because affective collectivization occurs not just through identification with but also through empathy with ‘the Other’. I agree with Martha Nussbaum’s argument that some moral and social concerns are best expressed in the form of a story. According to Nussbaum, “[c]itizens cannot relate well to the complex world around them by factual knowledge and logic alone” (2010: 95). Moreover, through “a wide range of narratives [we] must learn to identify with the lot of others, to see the world through their eyes, and to feel their sufferings vividly through the imagination” (2010: 40). Through engagement with works of literature and art, such as film, our empathy towards another becomes activated by affective resonance and processes of identification. This is Nussbaum’s theory concerning the importance of the narrative imagination in equipping society with tools for the effective experience of citizenship. In turn, for one to be able to experience full citizenship, one must be accepted by society and the feeling of belonging – so important for marginalized groups such as the gay community – is more easily strengthened through

larger/more platforms of representation that can engage processes of identification and affective ties to those who share or empathise with those representations.

Nussbaum believes that artistic creations, such as literature and drama, are vital to strengthen social acceptance and integration – essential elements of citizenship, as they affect the viewer and engage the imagination with representations of other realities. In Nussbaum’s words “[n]arrative art has the power to make us see the lives of the different with more than a casual tourist’s interest—with involvement and sympathetic understanding, with anger at our society’s refusals of visibility.” (Nussbaum 2008: 147) This is to say that through dissemination of stories of different social categories that denounce issues of different communities, the collective imagination may be stimulated to comprehend how different people’s idiosyncrasies are not strictly what makes them alien and help bring out what is fundamentally shared among communities. Hence, narrative imagination is fundamental in the conception of affective and intimate citizenship as it cultivates habits of empathy that lead to sympathetic responsiveness to another’s needs and to understanding the circumstances that shape those needs (Nussbaum 148). By reading a novel or watching a film, we can imagine how the depicted experiences may feel like and, thus, position ourselves in the place of ‘the Other’. Visual narratives and dramatic devices, then, explore both similarity and difference.

As I mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, the goal in this chapter is also to make clear the importance of narrative imagination applied to visual narratives, especially in regard to their portrayal of social inequity issues. Films such as *Angels in America* and *The Normal Heart* enable processes of identification for members of the gay community, nurturing a sense of community and making a connection with those who empathise with issues depicted.

As Ken Plummer argued, communities’ attachment to a story is stronger if the narrative weaves their history, their identity and their politics, and this dialectic of communities, identities and stories is an ongoing dynamic, as the community feeds the story and the story feeds the community (Plummer 87). According to Plummer:

stories and narratives depend upon communities that will create and hear those stories: social worlds, interpretive communities, communities of memory. The telling of sexual stories that can reach public communities of discourse has been a central theme. Without lesbian and gay stories, the lesbian and gay movement may not have flourished. (Plummer 145)

Therefore, through approximation with what we see on screen, we can relate our own sense of self as we identify with people's stories that share identical views and live similar experiences. The question of memory is also very important to mention, as reclaiming parts of civic history (no matter how much of an unpleasant reality they represent) is vital to enlighten society and to prevent certain issues from being relegated or forgotten.

So far, I have elaborated on the importance of narrative power in literature and film to raise social awareness to particular themes and to the construction of identities, but how do these processes engage with the notion of affective and intimate citizenship? Firstly, it is important to distinguish the two concepts in order to understand their relation to the affective visualisation of *Angels in America* and *The Normal Heart*.

As mentioned in previous paragraphs, the affective visualisation of films makes way for an emotional connection between the viewer and the object, with the viewer sometimes looking with, as opposed to at the characters on screen. This affective visualisation thus creates an emotional connection between the viewer and the piece of art and this emotional connection, shared by multiple viewers, allows for the creation of an affective community sharing the same affective attachment to the same cultural objects. This process of collectivization does not require likeness between the viewer and the characters on screen, it can happen whether there is a process of identification with the characters and objects, or whether there is an empathetic and emotional approximation to the values and experiences depicted, even if these experiences are not shared. This ideology is aligned with Veronika Zink's argument for the creation of affective communities, as it "focuses on sensual infrastructures of social encounters and on modes of affective exchange that make up the fabric of the formation and transformation of the social" (Zink 289). It is a conceptual framework that echoes Raymond William's notion of structures of feeling, accounting for the reproduction of common feelings and affects within a specific emotional context. Affective communities are based on empathy and emotional solidarity, an organic process sensitive to the dynamics of social movements that contrast the image of a persistent social body, and thus they are able to generate collectivization and open a space for the integration of alien communities.

Although affective approximation may be hindered by the passing of time, for instance, as the proximity between the community or the encounter with the artistic object dissipates, "affective impressions of communality generate an affective memory that can be reactivated" (Zink 294). Through the reproduction of artistic works and its appreciation by different, newer publics, the

message and experience become more deeply rooted, enabling a process of rememory¹⁷ that engages new groups with the same causes. This originates an ongoing affective dynamic that does not allow for the traumatic experience of marginalized communities to be erased or devalued. This is particularly important to consider, as narratives of trauma have dramatically reshaped the dominant account of U.S. citizenship, with profound effects on the ways people perceive their own social value and the social value of the ‘Other’, and on the ways they live daily life and see their futures (Berlant 1997: 2). Consequently, this repetition and reclaiming of the gay experience in film, allows for an approach to these objects and the issues they represent in a more permanent way, especially when it is able to engage with the performativity of publics “through sustained social performances” (Butler 141). This repetition of acts happens not only through social and political activism generated by the artistic works, but also in the possibility to engage more publics and more people in the normalization of gay representation in literary and visual creations. “The concept of performativity allows for the analysis of negotiations over the terms that regulate social hierarchies” (Lünenborg 325). Performativity is important to understand the contribution of visual narratives to the questions of affective and intimate citizenship, as “[a]ffective practices enable users to shift gradually from personal to public communication and become part of affective publics” (Lünenborg 326). This adds an affective component to the conventional understanding of citizenship as a rights-based political membership of the individual with the state. Thus, it helps to understand how affect and emotion are employed as mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion, as these categories can reinforce difference and differential treatment. As Bilgin Ayata argues:

While two individuals may be equal citizens from a legal point of view, their perceived difference in terms of religion, race, sex, gender, or class may result in identifying one individual as the proper, true citizen who is naturally entitled to privileges and status of citizenship, whereas the other may be identified as a “quasi” or “technical” citizen, whose belonging to the political community remains in question despite holding citizenship. In this case, additional affective and emotional efforts must be performed to confirm rightful political belonging. (330)

¹⁷ I appropriate this concept, originally attributed to Toni Morrison, to convey the meaning that “memory exists as a communal property of friends, of family, of a people. The magic of memory is that it is interpersonal, that it is the basis for constructing relationships with the other who also remembers.” (Rushdy 321-22)

Hence, bearing in mind the concept of affective citizenship is helpful to understand what is necessary beyond legal citizenship in order to partake in the full experience of belonging. Sharing affective ties with other members can help fulfil the social and political gaps that foster the existence of legal alien communities. Some of these social and political gaps are due to differences in cultural backgrounds, race, gender or other issues that are evinced by intimate aspects of people's lives. As I see it, when the individuals' political spheres and social rights are limited due to intimate aspects, the affective connection with the nation-state is hindered and herein lies the connection between the concepts of affective and intimate citizenship.

Intimate citizenship is a very helpful tool in the quest to alert to the necessity of public discourse around intimate issues in the private life of individuals. According to Ken Plummer, the concept looks at the decisions people have to make regarding the control, or lack thereof, over one's body, feelings, and relationships, as well as their access, or lack thereof, to representations, relationships, public spaces, and equal opportunities. Intimate citizenship is rooted on socially grounded choices, if choice is a possibility, over identities, gender experiences, and erotic experiences. It does not imply one model, one pattern or one way (Plummer 13). Plummer further argues, and I agree, that "much of the intimate conversations takes place because of the representations of intimacy we see on the media" (20), again contributing to the notion that stories help normalise issues revolving around intimacy, love and sexuality. This way, intimate aspects are seen by larger publics and generate dialogues around the depicted issues and identities depicted on screen, either by identification or by processes of empathising with 'the Other'. Lynn Jamieson has stated that there is a growing tendency towards "disclosing intimacies" (159), as dialogues around aspects of personal relationships become more frequent and revealing. This must call our attention to the importance of empathy and openness at a time when what are considered traditional categories, such as family and marriage, are going through changes, as new models of family appear and same-sex marriage becomes a possibility.

Viewing *Angels in America* and *The Normal Heart* with these theoretical considerations in mind allows us to become attentive to the challenges that the changing intimacies pose on people's personal life. The quest for visibility around intimate issues means that many lives now deal with moral wars around family politics, and body politics, as well as identity, religious, and sexual politics (Plummer 34). In the case in point, the boundaries between the private and the public are blurred when intimate choices are evinced by the activism of the gay rights movement which is seen by many as threatening to the established heteronormative social order.

Both works portray intimate struggles of the gay community in a public manner and how those struggles affect the gay community's attachment and perspective of the U.S. They also convey how the intimate sphere holds so much power over people's political and public action, as well as their experience of citizenship.

2.1. "America is no country for the infirm"

The complete title of the original play is *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, subsequently divided into two parts: *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika*. The play's title engages with the idea of national issues seen and dealt with from the gay community's point of view, in a holistic perspective of the community's participation in major national concerns. It also dwells on how the national themes – religion, race, health, politics – shape the gay experience. The opening scene of the miniseries sets the tone for this continuum of the delimitations of the national *versus* the personal and starts to dilute the boundaries between the public and the private. In Rabbi Chemelwitz's speech about the journey of the ancestors that still lives within people to this day, we can draw a parallel with the longing for belonging, for citizenship, that gay people try to achieve in U.S. society, just as their ancestors sought full belonging and citizenship. Albeit the circumstances and the protagonists of the journey have changed, the desire for acceptance and integration is the same.

As previously mentioned, Kushner's masterpiece intertwines fictional characters' stories with real people, or at least fictionalized versions of real people, as is the case of Roy M. Cohn, known for his illegal conferences with Judge Kaufman during the trial of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, and a version of the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg that torments Roy. Cohn in fiction, much like Cohn in real life, however, is very proud of his actions that led to the sentence and execution of the Rosenbergs for accusations of espionage. He was just 23 years old at the time he became known for his role as prosecutor in the trial. Despite his young age, he acted in prosecutorial misconduct, as Ethel Rosenberg was almost certainly innocent and Cohn encouraged witnesses, including her brother, to testify against her. It is also known that Cohn urged Judge Kaufman to condemn her (Esquire n.p).¹⁸

¹⁸ Roy Cohn's life story regained public attention in 2016, when his protégé Donald Trump became President of the United States: <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2017/06/donald-trump-roy-cohn-relationship> – Accessed on 5 May 2021.

Despite his political involvement with right-wing and conservative ideologies, Roy Cohn was a gay man who eventually died in 1986, due to AIDS-related complications. The fictionalized version Kushner makes of him in *Angels* depicts a man who lives a lie and that instead of using his position of power to claim attention to gay issues, fosters division and alienation. In this depiction of a person who takes advantage of a position of power merely for his own well-being, the cleavage between the powerful and the less powerful is evident, as well as the delimitations of choice and access to certain essential services and social rights in both groups.

When he first learns about his diagnose of AIDS, from Dr Henry, Roy refuses to accept his condition, a syndrome usually associated with drug addicts and homosexuals. Due to his social status he cannot be regarded as a homosexual:

Roy: Say: “Roy Cohn, you are a homosexual.” And I will proceed, systematically, to destroy your reputation and your practice and your career in the state of New York, Henry. Which you know I can do. (...) Your problem, Henry, is that you are hung up on words, on labels, that you believe they mean what they seem to mean. AIDS. Homosexual. Gay. Lesbian. You think these are names that tell you who someone sleeps with, but they don’t tell you that. (...) Like all labels, they tell you one thing and one thing only: where does an individual so identified fit in the food chain, in the pecking order? Not ideology, or sexual taste, but something much simpler: clout. Not who I fuck or who fucks me, but who will pick up the phone when I call, who owes me favours. This is what a label refers to. Now, to someone who does not understand this, homosexual is what I am because I have sex with men. But really this is wrong. Homosexuals are men who in fifteen years of trying cannot pass a pissant antidiscrimination bill through City Council. Homosexuals are men who know nobody and nobody knows. Who have zero clout. Does this sound like me, Henry? (...) I want you to understand. This is not sophistry. And this is not hypocrisy. This is reality. I have sex with men. But unlike nearly every other man of whom this is true, I bring the guy I’m screwing to the White House and President Reagan smiles at us and shakes his hand. Because what I am is defined entirely by who I am. Roy Cohn is not a homosexual. Roy Cohn is a heterosexual man, Henry, who fucks around with guys. (...) And what is my diagnosis, Henry?

Henry: You have AIDS, Roy.

Roy: No, Henry, no. AIDS is what homosexuals have. I have liver cancer. (Nichols, Ep. 1, 00:57:30)

During this scene at Henry's office, Roy remains apparently calm and confident, but his posture is threatening and invasive towards Henry, who keeps trying to muster the courage to pronounce the words Roy is enticing him to. It becomes apparent that Roy's concern is the social death sentence associated with AIDS, more than the health complications that come with the diagnosis. This version of the character of Roy represents the social groups that perceive homosexuality as a debasement in social status, which deepens the alienation of the gay community and hinders the experience of citizenship. Roy, however, is able to maintain higher social status and easily move through influential circles that include the President of the U.S., as he is not labelled as homosexual. Even when he later checks into the hospital, Roy refuses to be treated as an AIDS patient, sticking to his self-diagnosis of liver cancer. However, it is clear to other characters, and to the audience, that he made use of his powerful social position to gain privileged access to the new drug given to AIDS patients, AZT. Henry makes clear at the time there was a two-year waiting list for that drug, and yet somehow Roy got hold of it.

Prior's best friend, Belize, is a nurse who accompanies Roy's case closely at the hospital, and towards whom Roy's arrogance does not show any inclination to slow down. Belize is an African American former drag queen who maintains his diva-ish personality even while working at the hospital, which can be seen in the way he dresses and in his manner of speaking.

When Roy gets to the hospital issues revolving around Belize's racial identity become evident:

Roy: Get outta here you, I got nothing to say to you.

Belize: Just doin' my job.

Roy: I want a white nurse. My constitutional right.

Belize: You're in a hospital, you don't have any constitutional rights.

(Belize begins preparing Roy's arm for the insertion of the IV drip needle, palpating the vein, disinfecting the skin. He moves to insert the IV needle in Roy's arm.)

Roy (*Nervous*): Find the vein, you moron, don't start jabbing that goddamned spigot in my arm till you find the fucking vein or I'll sue you so bad they'll repossess your teeth you dim black motherfucker.

Belize (*Had enough; very fierce*): Watch yourself. You don't talk that way to me when I'm holding something this sharp. Or I might slip and stick it in your heart. If you have a heart. (Nichols, Ep. 4, 00:54:50)

Roy and Belize's interaction is a back and forth of hostility from Roy, bouncing off Belize's contempt. Suddenly, probably for the first time in Roy's life, the position of power has turned for him as he does not have the upper hand over his current situation. Belize is quick to show him that although Roy has found himself capable of making influential decisions and holding power over many situations, he will not be able to do so on Belize's shift. Roy will be treated as any other patient, which is to say, without constitutional rights. This is a passage that denounces the conditions of the healthcare system in the U.S., where access to proper and fair medical care are dependent on people's financial power and social status.

Roy finds himself being cared for by an African American homosexual nurse, someone who displays so many features that Roy despises. His sick body depends on the treatment that this 'dim black motherfucker' will provide him. Unable to accept this new power relation, Roy tries to establish a connection with Belize through a recounting of the historical relation between the Jewish and the African Americans. Belize, however, is impenetrable and dismisses Roy's attempt, until Roy almost begs for a chance of conversation and asks not to be alone. He despises being in hospital for it represents sickness and weakness, and he refuses to be seen as weak. He gained power by prowling on those weaker than him. The man whose public sphere of influence had helped him accomplish so much, who was never completely true to himself, hiding his sexuality and publicly blaming those who represented 'the Other', the enemy, suddenly finds himself alone, disguising his 'disease of homosexuals' as liver cancer. The company he has at this time of loneliness is a person who represents those he helped condemn and further alienate from society his whole life. Visibly, we can see that Roy is very fragile and vulnerable and trying to maintain his usual brute posture.

For Belize, there is an affective connection, as he is able to show empathy towards Roy due to his condition. He advises Roy on the best route for treatment he should choose, even though Roy is reluctant to listen to him instead of his "very qualified, very expensive WASP doctor" (Nichols, Ep. 4, 00:14:15). Due to his political power, Roy is able to get the new treatment, AZT, and Belize warns him about the danger of wasting time with placebos in his debilitated condition:

Roy: You hate me.

Belize: Yes.

Roy: Why are you telling me this?

Belize: I wish I knew.

(Pause)

Roy (*Very nasty*): 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. (Nichols, Ep. 4, 00:15:35)

Despite his final contempt for Belize's advice, Roy uses his influence to request his own supply of AZT, with no placebos – a lifetime supply. Through dishonest acts and blackmailing, Roy Cohn's social status helps him to achieve a full experience of citizenship (even if in this case, it implies privilege). He can overcome basic social questions, such as the access to appropriate medical care, and even though he is gay, his political influence enables him to avoid alienating consequences. Roy transforms his hospital room into something that resembles an office, with paperwork by his bedside, smoking cigars even as he is connected to an IV drip. Also by his bedside, photographs of him shaking hands with President Reagan and his wife. Roy chooses the First Family as his affective ties that may provide him with some comfort in the hospital. To him, power and his political connections are what define the scope of his personal relations. He values mostly his relationship with the most powerful family in the country:

Belize: There are maybe thirty people in the whole country who are getting this drug.

Roy: Now there's 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. So put your brown eyes back in your head, baby. I am not moved by an unequal distribution of goods on this earth. It's history, I didn't write it. Though I flatter myself I am a footnote. And you are a nurse, so minister and skedaddle. (Nichols, Ep 4, 00:47:00)

Roy goes on to admit that he does not want to dispense pills to Belize because he hates him and all of his friends – which may mean both his gay friends and his African American friends. This attitude reveals a lot about Roy’s feeling of superiority and his regard of his own citizenship as more valid than others’.

Roy: Move your nigger cunt spade faggot lackey ass out of my room.

Belize (*overlapping, starting on “spade”*): Shit-for-brains filthy-mouthed selfish motherfucking cowardly cock-sucking cloven-hoofed pig.

Roy (*overlapping, starting on “cowardly”*): Mongrel. Ding. Slave. Ape.

Belize: Kike.

Roy: Now you’re talking!

Belize: Greedy kike.

Roy: Now you can have a bottle. But only one. (Nichols, Ep 4, 00:48:00)

Belize takes some bottles away from Roy’s stock, which he claims his friends need. Roy is in distress in bed not only over this, but because he is tormented by the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg. He mentions her to Belize, who dismisses it as a hallucination of a very sick man. Even close to death, Roy still takes advantage of his status over the less powerful, but he is haunted by the behaviour he had all his life, represented by Rosenberg’s ghostly apparition. As Roy engages in conversation with Ethel’s ghost, the viewer is shown alternated scenes of Roy speaking to her and speaking to an empty chair, conveying how this dialogue is taking place inside Roy’s tormented mind. He laughs and speaks loudly, covered in sweat, with visible K.S. lesions on his face:

Roy: Worst thing about being sick in America, Ethel, is you’re booted out of the parade. Americans have no use for sick. And look at Reagan. He’s so healthy he’s hardly human. He’s a hundred if he’s a day. He takes a slug in his chest. Two days later he’s out West, ridin’ ponies, in his PJs. I mean, who does that? That’s America. It’s just no country for the infirm. (Nichols, Ep. 4, 00:50:00)

This is the America represented in *Angels*. A country ruled by a president who is hardly human, thus setting an example of strength and impenetrability to his people: a forged ideal of

leadership. I choose to use the word ‘America’, as it conveys a meaning that relies more on the idealised notion of the country than ‘the U.S.’. Hence, the ideal of the exceptional nation, the land of the free and equal, is devoid of significance, as what the film shows is the inequality among citizens, particularly in the absence of a concrete health system that can provide adequate aid to all people. This is a fractural reality that is made more evident in a time of crisis, when the country fails to gear its action towards helping a minority.

2.2. “Power to the people, amen!”

In *Angels in America*, Belize’s character represents a category of the gay community whose dimension holds different and more intricate levels than other queer folks. On top of their sexuality and intimate questions, people like Belize have other struggles and issues that curtail their experience of citizenship and belonging. There are many identity aspects at stake other than his sexuality: there are questions of race, as he is African American, and questions of social background and status.¹⁹ Belize is a former drag queen, with a degree of gender fluidity to him in the manner he dresses and speaks. Labels such as queer/gay are not enough to describe Belize and encompass the magnitude of his struggles, neither is it enough to compare him with other gay characters. These struggles are evident with Roy but also with Louis, with whom he has fractural moments but also moments of empathy. This character’s strength lies therein, in his ability to empathise.

Belize and Louis meet at a diner and Louis makes a speech that portrays the different dimensions of strife within the gay community, whether one is a Jewish, white Christian, or African American gay:

Louis: You have Bush talking about human rights (...) these people don’t begin to know what, ontologically, freedom is or human rights, like they see these bourgeois property-based Rights-of-Man-type rights but that’s not enfranchisement, not democracy, not what’s implicit, what’s potential within the idea, not the idea with blood in it. That’s just liberalism, the worst kind of liberalism, really, bourgeois tolerance, and what I think is that what AIDS shows us is the limits of tolerance, that it’s not enough to be tolerated, because when the shit

¹⁹ According to Douglas Crimp, in 1987 54% of the people with AIDS in New York City were black and Hispanic: www.jstor.org/stable/3397562 – Accessed 17 April 2021.

hits the fan you find out how much tolerance is worth. Nothing. And underneath all tolerance is intense, passionate hatred. (Nichols, Ep. 3, 00:08:55)

Belize is listening without much engagement in Louis's speech, but nevertheless, this *quasi*-monologue reveals truths about U.S. politics and society. It represents how the AIDS breakout of the 1980s served to expose that the gay community was merely tolerated by most of society and misrepresented by political entities. Once the community needed closer attention to their issues, not just civil but health issues too, the latent tolerance of government officials and other people was replaced by disinterest in problems that affected a minority. At the same time, the charges of immorality as the root of those problems gained social relevance. Louis's speech is intertwined with scenes of a vulnerable, naked Prior, covered in K.S. lesions, being treated by nurse Emily.

Belize is visibly uninterested in Louis's arguments but still the latter goes on to move on through other subjects such as religion and race, speaking of these themes in connection to the nation-state and how one affects the other. Belize's interest is sparked when Louis mentions issues of race:

Louis: [T]he thing about America, I think, is that ultimately we're different from every other nation on earth, in that, with people here of every race, we can't— Ultimately what defines us is not race, but politics. Not like any European country where there's an unsurmountable fact of a kind of racial, or ethnic, monopoly or monolith²⁰ (...) Whereas here in America—

Belize: Here in America race doesn't count.

Louis: No! You can't be hearing that.

Belize: Well, I...

Louis: Look, look. Race, yes. But ultimately race here is a political question. Racists just try to use race here as a tool in a political struggle. It's not really about race. There are no angels in America. No spiritual past, no racial past. There's only the political, the shifting downwards and outwards of political power to the people.

²⁰ In the original text of the play, Louis goes on to state something that makes evident the issues with social minorities in the U.S.: "Here there are so many small problems, it's really just a collection of small problems, the monolith is missing. Oh, I mean, of course I suppose there's the monolith of White America. White Straight Male America." (Kushner 95)

Belize: Power to the people, Amen. Oh, my goodness, would you look at the time. (Nichols, Ep 3, 00:11:00)

Belize tries to cut the conversation short as he can no longer deal with Louis's offensive remarks. Louis tries to save face from Belize's racist accusation in their dialogue by saying that Belize hates him for being Jewish. Despite being gay and Jewish, Louis is a white male and what is represented in the diner scene is the social battle between the power of White America *versus* Black America. This is evident when the characters throw names of real-life political representatives, such as Jesse Jackson and Ed Koch, at each other so strengthen their arguments. References to Ed Koch²¹ are also very present in the narrative of *The Normal Heart*.

What transpires from their dialogue is the representation of what Sara Ahmed calls racialized bodies. Racialization is the process of attributing meaning to skin colour, turning the colour of the skin, from a descriptive function, into a racial identity. Understanding racialized bodies implies the comprehension that the process of racialization marks the body as its site (Ahmed 46). As Ahmed further argues: “[r]acialization involves the production of ‘the racial body’ through knowledge, as well as the constitution of both social and bodily space in the everyday encounters we have with others.” (47). This imprinting of identity meaning upon skin colour results in a clear separation of bodies and identities with differential added value. Thus, people's experience of citizenship is influenced and limited by the perception of their position in society as higher or lower. The reading of Belize's additional struggle to be a full citizen relying upon his sexual orientation, social class and skin colour are in line with Suzanna Danuta Walters's views on how multiple markers of difference shape people's identities in profound ways. In her own words: “[q]ueer men, queer women, and now the visible category of queer transgender people often remain in separate worlds, with their own politics, culture, and language that mark them as different both from other queers and from the rest of U.S. society” (Walters 146).

2.3. “We are all just ticking time bombs”

In order to write about *The Normal Heart* and examine the questions of citizenship raised in the film, it is a good idea to reiterate what was previously mentioned about the approach of the film

²¹ Ed Koch became mayor of New York City, in 1977 and served for three terms. In both *Angels* and *The Normal Heart* there are insinuations of his closeted homosexuality.

to gay issues. Contrasting *Angels in America*, *The Normal Heart* depicts a very raw reality not relying on metaphorical language or fantastic images. Therefore, Kramer's depictions of real people do not follow Kushner's fictionalized creation, thus resulting in a more realistic representation.

Moreover, Kramer's work does not merely allude to the difficulties experienced by the gay community during the HIV/AIDS outburst but represents the layered struggles of members of the community through factual information, using a character like Emma Brookner, based on the real Dr Linda Laubenstein²². She was also Kramer's friend and a pioneer in the research for HIV/AIDS, *The Normal Heart* enables an accurate portrayal of the treatment that the American health authorities and facilities subjected HIV/AIDS patients to during the 1980s. Additionally, Kramer's politically charged work, with its representation of the activist fight of the GMHC and the characters' involvement with socio-political action and engagement with Government officials, creates a very evident link between the notions of intimate and affective citizenship and the gay community's emotional attachment and feeling of belonging as full U.S. citizens.

From the beginning of her relationship with Ned, Emma does not euphemize or devalue the importance of the new disease that is afflicting dozens of gay men in New York. She is adamant about raising awareness for the necessity of accountability from the community to prevent spreading the virus, and also for the need of action from the Government and health authorities in enabling research for appropriate treatment. Emma shares her concerns with Ned and both start working together.

While giving Ned details about the increasing number of HIV/AIDS patients and the manoeuvres she operates in order to have them all hospitalized and receiving the closest to appropriate care, Ned notices the food trays outside the patients' rooms:

Ned: Why is all the food sitting outside their rooms like this? It's getting cold.

Emma: It's always cold because the appropriate staff won't bring it into the room so it sits and rots until one of my staff can. (Murphy, 00:21:25)

²² Linda Laubenstein was an American physician and early HIV/AIDS researcher who was among the first doctors in the U.S. to recognize the AIDS epidemic in the early 1980s and co-authored the first article linking AIDS with Kaposi's sarcoma.

Initially, the viewer may assume that the hospital staff is too afraid of the virus to enter the patients' rooms, even if it is inhumane that hospitalised patients are deprived of food. However, moments later it becomes clear that this refusal of hospital staff to deal more closely with HIV/AIDS patients comes from prejudice, just as much as it comes from fear. The entire scene portrays an environment not just of sickness, but of a decaying hospital ward that clearly functions as a place for the dejected. A man named Stanford is covered in K.S. lesions. He is in a delusional state under the cold white-blue light of the tile-stained hospital room, a light that makes his sick body look even more grey-skinned. In another room, two young-men in a very debilitated state are laying side by side, holding lesioned hands. Emma speaking: "Can you imagine this at nineteen? Your first boyfriend you were gonna spend your whole life with." (Murphy, 00:23:00)

When Emma and Ned are leaving the ward, they run into the TV repairman who did not fix the broken TV set in Stanford's room:

Emma: Excuse me. You're the TV guy. Please go to room 407 and fix it.

TV guy: No, I'm not gonna do that.

Emma: Fix the TV. It's your fucking job!

TV guy: My union says I don't gotta risk my life for some contagious fairy.

(Emma is silent for a moment. Then turns to Ned.)

Emma: So what exactly has your side been doing? (Murphy, 00:23:30)

Not only are these patients dying from a physical illness, but the prejudice against them stands in the way of them getting the full appropriate equalitarian treatment they should have. This excursion through the ward is very impactful on Ned as it becomes visually clear for him – and for viewers – how HIV/AIDS degrades people's lives, and to what extent an 'intimate' illness can limit the chance for equal treatment as U.S. citizens. In another scene Emma questions what the gay community has been doing to actively fight the virus.

Emma's fight, alongside the GMHC, builds up throughout the years that compose the narrative timeline. The group keeps fighting for equal treatment but also for action from the Government, namely in the recognition of a new deadly virus that is affecting the gay community and that needs further research in order to be appropriately dealt with. After three years of her first

reported case, Emma has a meeting with a peer review panel from the Government in order to obtain funding for more research on the virus. Showing a picture presentation of patients in very poor health conditions, with various forms of skin lesions of serious dimension, Emma recites the reasons why the U.S. should be focusing on research, particularly due to the growing number of victims. She is denied the request for funding; yet, she mentions that the Government has “five million dollars in the pipeline” (Murphy, 01:36:13), for two thousand AIDS cases, but spent three million dollars investigating “seven deaths from Tylenol” (Murphy, 01:36:22). It is implicit that Emma refers to this disparate attribution of funding because the seven deaths from Tylenol were not regarded as an issue specific to a minority. Nevertheless, the application for funding is rejected based on allegations that Emma’s research is imprecise and unfocused:

Emma: Your National Institutes of Health received my fund request two years ago. It took you one year just to print up application forms. It’s taken you three years from my first reported case just to show up here for a look, and the paltry amount of money you are forcing us to beg for out of the four billion dollars you now receive each and every year to protect the health of the American people won’t come to anyone before only God knows when. (...) Why do you refuse to cooperate with the French? Why are we told not to cooperate with the French? Just so you can steal a Nobel Prize while something is being passed around that causes death!?! (*a beat then:*) Women have been discovered to have it in Africa where it is clearly transmitted heterosexually. It is only a matter of time. We could all be dead before you do anything! (Murphy, 01:37:35)

As Emma raises her voice and becomes visibly distressed, throwing her papers, the leader of the panel grimaces, as if expecting such an outburst from a woman. Notwithstanding, Emma’s discourse conveys that the lack of Government funding and interest in researching the disease comes from a place of prejudice and association of the virus with the gay community. She also implies that the situation would be different if it was a condition spreading among heterosexual people in the U.S.. This insinuation turns out to be true when Ned is finally able to go to the White House to discuss the evolution of the virus with John Bruno, Advisor to the President. Ned sees the invitation with great hope after not being able to even discuss the matter with the Mayor of New York, Ed Koch. By the time he gets to the White House, the number of cases has gone up to three thousand three hundred and thirty-nine, with one thousand one hundred and twenty-two deaths:

Ned: Sounds like a plague to me. I'm scared, aren't you? *(pause)* What does your title mean again?

John Bruno: I come up with ideas for the President about what he ought to be doing and not doing.

Ned: Okay, good. Got it. So, the money is there, right? It just hasn't been spent.

John Bruno: I can assure you that not a week goes by that I don't bring new information and reports to the President. The progress that has been made with this disease is unprecedented.

Ned: But it's contagious. Can't you see that because it is contagious you have to work faster? (...) Your boss hasn't said the word 'AIDS' out loud.

(Bruno gets up and closed the door)

John Bruno: Answer me this one question. This shit, can hookers get it or someone who had a one-night stand?

Ned: Of course!

John Bruno: You can't prove that. From what I understand, from what I've heard, female to male transmission through normal vaginal intercourse is not very efficient. (Murphy, 01:41:25)

As Ned assures the Advisor that the virus does not discriminate, John Bruno insists on having a confirmation that “[i]t’s almost impossible for a straight, regular heterosexual guy to get it” (Murphy, 01:43:03), as there was not a single documented case of a heterosexual man infected. After that, John Bruno ends the meeting suddenly and leaves. It becomes clear that all he was looking for was some form of appeasement of mind that because he is a heterosexual man there is no chance of getting the disease. In his words, the distinction of heterosexual guys as regular vs gay guys as irregular is very evident, denoting deep-rooted prejudice in the class of straight white men that rules the country. The inaction of the Government is, therefore, based on blatant discrimination among different categories of citizens. President Reagan did not say the word AIDS for six years. Ned claims, on national television, that the epidemic is being intentionally ignored by the Government, something which is met with serious criticism by his peers. However, on his next TV appearance Ned claims that the mayor, Ed Koch, is ignoring the epidemic because “the mayor is gay and he’s scared shitless out of his panties it’ll blow his

cover” (Murphy, 00:48:52), before he is cut-off the air. This suggests that high officials did not want to call attention to the problem, as they were afraid of what it might do to their reputation if they were associated with the disease or the gay community.

In fact, despite writing provocative articles that urge gay men to come out, fight back prejudice and claim space in the national political sphere, thereby claiming responsibility upon the community, Ned keeps meeting obstacles in fighting against the prejudice and heteronormativity: the meetings with his friends at the GMHC, make these obstacles evident. When preparing for a charity event to support funding for the organization, Ned puts “The Gay Men’s Health Crisis Committee” as the return address on the envelopes for the invites. Bruce and the rest of the group believe that the envelope should contain just the initials of the association, as the word gay will jeopardise the cause and even harm the reputation of the men receiving those envelopes on the mail. A simple small word can be a cause of much harm on someone’s life. Still, actions from the GMHC are effective and they are able to raise more money than any other gay group ever in New York, raising fifty-three thousand dollars at once at one of their first events. This event, that shows the evolution of the gay community to actually engage in the fight against HIV/AIDS, takes the form of a dance where men can dance together and fully express their identities in a safe space. As Ned dances with Felix, he says: “Imagine if we had this when we were young, no fear, no shame” (00:45:38), while Billie Holiday’s “The Man I Love” plays in the background, sung by an all-gay men choir.

The work of the GMHC is explored throughout the narrative and that allows for greater visibility of the activist work that generated from the HIV/AIDS outbreak. The arts, whether dramatic, literary or visual and musical movements, can have a prominent role in the activist fight and shine light on the social issues at hand. Douglas Crimp stated that within the arts there is the assumption that cultural producers can respond to the epidemic in only two ways: by raising money for scientific research and service organizations or by creating works that express human suffering and loss (3). With *The Normal Heart*, Larry Kramer was able to respond in both ways, and his characters represent the difficulties in the campaign for raising awareness and money for scientific research. Crimp goes on to say that “[a]rt is what survives, endures,

transcends; art constitutes our legacy” (4), and Kramer’s art and activism have indeed endured and materialized as part of the Gay Rights Movement to this day.²³

2.4. “Life can be bright in America, if you can fight in America”

When Bruce tells Ned that he never met anyone like him and that Ned doesn’t look *that* Jewish, Ned says to him: “Well, you don’t look gay, so I guess we could both pass for white people” (00:39:45). They are both white, but their whiteness is hindered by their sexual orientation. If they could pass for white people, they would be able to take full advantage of the same rights as the white heteronormative American society. Nonetheless, Ned is not quite so sensitive to the struggles of the different members of the gay community, in comparison to Louis, in *Angels*. This becomes apparent after Ned’s television appearances:

Ned: You used to be a fighter once. Did you like being in the Green Berets?

Bruce: Yes. I loved it.

Ned: Have you completely forgotten how to fight?

Bruce: Don’t tell me how to fight. I just fight differently than you do. (Murphy, 00:50:08)

Ned is a writer from an apparently economical privileged background, something which even in the gay community gives him some leverage in public political fight and advantage over some other community members who are included in other minority groups. Bruce was in the U.S. military, which may partially explain why he “does not look gay”, as Ned put it. That may well be because of the intolerance of the military towards gay people. In fact, after World War II, homosexuals were not permitted to take part in the military in the U.S. This ban was theoretically only lifted on October 1, 1993, through the introduction of the policy “don’t ask, don’t tell” (DADT), by President Bill Clinton, though in effect it continued a statutory ban. President Obama went on to sign the legislation to repeal this policy in December 2010. The

²³ Though Kramer’s activist work is more notorious and evinced in the representation of the GMHC in *The Normal Heart*, Kushner’s work has been inspiring too, namely, after the death of Matthew Sheperd, 21 year-old student who was brutally attacked in Wyoming and died. Protesters from the Westboro Baptist Church, incited by pastor Fred Phelps, picketed Sheperd’s bearing signs with homophobic slogans. Allies dressed as angels to block the protesters. (<https://www.matthewshepard.org> – Accessed on 29 May 2021) Angel Action was repeated in 2018 after protesters invaded the funerals of the victims of the Pulse massacre (<https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/orlando-nightclub-massacre/angels-quietly-block-westboro-protesters-orlando-funeral-n595311> – Accessed on 29 May 2021).

ban intended to make a clear separation between the state, who has the obligation to protect citizens and the nation's ideals and values, from deviated sexual identities. If the nation's idealized family model does not encompass homosexuality and sees homosexuals as partial citizens, then the family must be protected from behaviours that were deemed as perverted.

The difficulties in establishing a career as an openly gay citizen however were (are) not limited to the military. We watch it in *Angels*, in Roy Cohn's assertiveness in not letting his sexuality define or interfere with any part of his social and political sphere. When Joe leaves Harper, Roy urges him to go back because he will not succeed in his career in Washington if he does not correspond to the idealized model of what is expected from an American state-attorney. Again, it is possible to establish a comparison with *Philadelphia*, where Andrew Beckett is fired from the law firm where he works, once his diagnosis and, consequently, his sexuality become known to the older partners of the firm. In *The Normal Heart*, there are other characters who represent the struggle between the private dimension of their intimacy in conflict with their professional sphere, and how it curtails their career potentiality. This conflict is very evident when the GMHC meets with Hiram Keebler, a character loosely based on mayor Koch's liaison on gay rights and the Orthodox Jewish community, Herb Rickman. Keebler starts the meeting by stating that the mayor is very impressed by how the GMHC has been shouldering their "own responsibilities" (Murphy, 01:10:53), which puts the stress for the cause on the community rather than the country. While the other members of the group remain calm, thanking Keebler for the attention he is now giving them, Ned keeps exploding claiming responsibility from the Government, that they waited for over one year to have this meeting.

Hiram Keebler: Don't you think I want to help you? I have a friend who is dying of this shit, right now in the VA hospital. But it's very tricky. You can see that. It is very tricky.

Ned: Tricky shit! There are a million gay people in New York. A million and one counting you.

Hiram Keebler: You know what? A fire goes out in a school furnace on the West Side, I get three thousand calls in one day. You know what I mean? If so many of you are so upset, why am I only hearing from this loud mouth?

Ned: That's a very good question.

Hiram Keebler: Okay, so there are half a million gay men in our area. 315 cases isn't so high considering how many of us – of you! – there are. (...) I think, that is, the mayor thinks, you guys are overreacting (Murphy, 01:12:27)

Keebler is obviously another closeted gay who is too afraid to get involved in the cause because he fears the consequences for his own life and career, if he is associated with the disease and the community. Keebler uses Ned's intense physical outbursts as the perfect excuse to leave the meeting without any Governmental action being taken to support the cause, but not before threatening Mickey about his job. Keebler speaking: "You are Michael R. Marcus. You hold an insecure job with the city's Department of Health. I'd watch out for your friends if I were you." (Murphy, 01:13:25)

Ned sees this as a sign that they need to be more out in the open and even more vocal about the community's issues around HIV/AIDS and discrimination, but the other members of the GMHC are afraid of such exposure. Even if Keebler is gay (and potentially the mayor is too) they still hold positions of power. They can exert their power over members of the community that do not have the same status, in order to protect themselves and secure their positions.

In a scene that takes place in the year after that meeting, Mickey's job is still threatened by Keebler, and Mickey spirals in a monologue that conveys his built-up frustration from his fear of losing his job, from overworking on research over the possible causes of the virus, and from emotional exhaustion that comes from the lack of support and Governmental inaction. Unravelling different conspiracy theories over lab-created viruses made by the U.S. Government, in which he would never believe until now, Mickey says: "I used to love my country" (01:26:19). I will parallel this line with the consideration Belize shares with Louis about their country, shaped by his experience of citizenship, and connect the conclusion of this chapter with what was established in its introduction:

Belize: Big ideas are all you love. America is what Louis loves. (...) I hate America, Louis, I hate this country. Nothing but a bunch of big ideas and stories and people dying, and then people like you. The white cracker who wrote the National Anthem knew what he was doing. He set the word 'free' to a note so high nobody could reach it. That was deliberate. Nothing on Earth sounds less like freedom to me. You come with me to room 1013 over at the hospital, Louis, I'll show you America. Terminal, crazy and mean. I live in America, Louis.

I don't have to love it. You do that. Everybody's gotta love somethin'. (Nichols, Ep. 5, 00:39:01)

'America', the land of the free, represents a promised land who is not available to all, especially to those that do not fit the nation's ideals. That distance between what is one's nationality and a true feeling of belonging is represented in both *Angels in America* and *The Normal Heart* in how the characters' affective disconnections with the U.S. are shown to come from their hindered experiences of citizenship.

In conclusion: what's love got to do with it?

With my final remarks I want to reinforce that film, in its nature, is a medium that relies on emotion. Thus, visualising films affectively can engage the viewer with multi-layered aspects of a narrative and its characters' plots, as it calls for a heightened attentiveness to nuanced emotional expression. *Angels in America* and *The Normal Heart* are particularly good examples of art works that depict the experience of intimacy and romantic love in a crisis context. These experiences were successfully transported from stage to film and were able to represent the deep-rooted connections of the individuals' intimacy with their relation to the nation-state. They generate dialogue which can, in turn, lead to the normalisation of narratives similar to the ones on screen. Film and other media forms and cultural expressions are influential in shaping people's perceptions.

By demonstrating how intimate narratives are so often connected to national concerns, this work also explored how the dissipating boundaries between the private and the public can foster the creation of affective communities and thus involve partial citizens in a more concrete feeling of belonging and relating to the nation-state, that is, in a more fulfilling experience of citizenship.

Nevertheless, I believe that both visual works can still give way to deeper and varied research, especially through the lens of affect theory and questions of citizenship. Going back to the full title of the original play of *Angels in America: a Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, I think there are more issues that could use attention. Like many Jewish authors, Kushner does not shy away from his religion's influence in his writing. The questions of religion and race, and how those ties have influence over the experience of citizenship are present throughout the plot, but this thesis was not the place to explore them in depth. As Kushner's words come to life in the voice of Louis: "there are no angels in America" and this in itself could give way for an essay. What is the whole meaning of being an angel in America? And why are there none? In what ways do people's individual experiences, besides their sexuality, prevent them from achieving a full experience of citizenship and a complete sense of belonging to their nation? I approached racialization but there are other aspects to consider. *The Normal Heart*, for instance, lacks the representation of non-white characters.

There were a couple of mentions to *Philadelphia* but there are still many works that can benefit from this kind of analysis as well. We have been witnessing an insurgence of young adult fiction orientated towards the gay community and affect theory can provide valuable tools to analyse these works, particularly when the focus is on narrative power and identity processes in the *bildungsroman* genre.

The focus on the affects represented in *Angels* and *The Normal Heart* is not intended to romanticize any of the issues depicted and faced by the gay community. On the contrary, what both Kushner and Kramer were able to do was to call attention to the community's problems. As Ken Plummer argues, “[f]or would be citizens, telling sexual personal stories about ‘their rights’ and establishing ‘communities of support’ is a crucial part of [the] process” (56) – the process of attributing rights but also responsibilities. These narratives are a form of making a stance on the value and visibility of queer lives.

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