

# Memory and Matthew Shepard

## Opposing Expressions of Public Memory in Television Movies

John Lynch

*University of Cincinnati*

In March 2002, two different movies about the murder of gay University of Wyoming student Matthew Shepard appeared on NBC and HBO. NBC's *The Matthew Shepard Story* falls into the movie-of-the-week genre and drafts a public memory of gay men that reinforces heteronormativity. HBO's *The Laramie Project* eschews the television movie genre and provides an alternative public memory that expresses a more progressive vision of gays and lesbians. This article highlights how public memory develops in a series of iterations or drafts that appear first in television and print journalism and then dramatized television treatments. If journalism is the first draft of public memory, then television movies are the second draft, and the public memories television movies express are shaped—and constrained—when they follow generic conventions.

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In March 2002, two movies about the murder of Matthew Shepard, a gay University of Wyoming student, aired on NBC and HBO. Lured out of a bar in Laramie, Wyoming, by two men who pretended to be gay, Shepard was robbed, brutally beaten, and then left tied to a fence in the freezing Wyoming night. He died several days later at a hospital in Fort Collins, Colorado.

NBC's movie, *The Matthew Shepard Story*, details the mental and emotional struggle of Matthew's parents, Judy and Dennis Shepard, as they decide whether to ask for the death penalty at the trial of one of the murderers. The movie is interspersed with flashbacks to Matthew Shepard's life, including heartwarming familial moments, moments of awkward coming-out, and depictions of the homophobic brutality and sexual assault Shepard had faced on two occasions before his murder in Wyoming. Stockard Channing, who played the role of Judy Shepard, won an Emmy for her role (*Emmys for Fan Favorites*, 2002).

HBO aired a movie adaptation of the off-Broadway play, *The Laramie Project*. The play developed from a series of interviews that members of the Tectonic Theater Project conducted with residents of Laramie, Wyoming, from the month after Shepard's murder through the trial of Aaron McKinney. The play shows the people of Laramie decrying the murder and expressing sympathy for Matthew Shepard and his family while denigrating homosexuality and those who "flaunt" it. The play

became the second most produced play in the 2001-2002 theater season (Shewey, 2002), and the HBO movie adaptation received an Emmy nomination for writing (Academy of Television Arts & Sciences, 2006).

These television movies represent unique moments in the creation of the public memory of gay men through the symbolic vehicle of Matthew Shepard. As Stephen Browne (1995) notes, "public memory lives as it is given expressive form" (p. 248). These two expressive forms work to draft public memories that either bolster and sustain current forms of heteronormativity (as in the case of *The Matthew Shepard Story*) or decenter and problematize heteronormativity (as in the case of *The Laramie Project*). NBC's *The Matthew Shepard Story* falls squarely in the genre of the movie-of-the-week and its development out of early news media coverage (Cuklanz, 1996; Rapping, 1992). If the news represents the first draft of our public memories, then the movie-of-the-week represents the second draft. *The Matthew Shepard Story* gives expressive form to a hegemonic public memory of gay men and reaffirms the expressive forms of that memory first drafted in the news coverage. *The Laramie Project*, on the other hand, drafts a different type of public memory that decenters many of the heteronormative assumptions in *The Matthew Shepard Story* and other public memories of gay men.

Public memory exists only as it is expressed, and in its expression, it enters a contested area where symbols of identity and difference develop. Public memory studies, with the exception of Lipsitz (1990) and Vivian (2002), rarely look at the medium of television and television's genres as a site of the construction and contestation of public memory. Yet television represents a powerful medium for transmitting symbols of identity and difference—key elements of public memory—that has as much, if not more, influence than commemorative addresses (Browne, 1993), memorials (Blair, Jeppeson, & Pucci, 1991; Buettner, 2006; Jorgensen-Earp & Lanzilotti, 1998; Wright, 2005), parades (Browne, 1995; Kammen, 1991), or historic sites (Browne, 1995; Kammen, 1991; Miller, 1992). Television also has been a key site, along with cinema, in creating the public's memory of gays and lesbians: Any treatment of how gays and lesbians are remembered must take television into account.

This essay argues that *The Matthew Shepard Story* and *The Laramie Project* represent two attempts to write the public memory of gays and lesbians. *The Matthew Shepard Story* embodies the standard heteronormative memory, whereas *The Laramie Project* contests that vision and tries to write a new memory of Matthew Shepard—and through him—gays and lesbians. What follows is an argument in three parts about the drafting of public memory. First, I address public memory studies and argue that public memory consists of embodied performances continually open to contestation, and I argue that previous memories of gays and lesbians have treated them as victims and as problems encountered by heterosexuals. Second, I examine *The Matthew Shepard Story* in light of previous studies of the movie-of-the-week genre: The movie of the week is the second draft of hegemonic and heteronormative public memory that builds off the first draft found in television news.

Third, I examine *The Laramie Project* as an attempt to break with the generic conventions of the movie-of-the-week to provide a more progressive public memory.

## Public Memory and Images of Gays and Lesbians

Critics have identified three broad characteristics of public memory: It is a site of cultural competition, a type of performance, and a materialization of social text (Browne, 1993; Zelizer, 1995, 1998). As Zelizer (1995) notes, “memory studies presume multiple conflicting accounts of the past” (p. 217). All events that become a part of public memory have been the site of struggle: Various groups try to place their imprint on it and thus shape the community for which that memory is salient. Memories of gays and lesbians in the broader American public memory have been fairly monolithic, and contestation of those memories has primarily occurred in counterpublics and their counterpublic memories (Bravmann, 1997; Castiglia, 2000; Warner, 2002). Although standard—and stereotypical—memories of gays and lesbians dominate the larger sphere of American public memory, that dominance is not eternally secure. As Browne (1993) notes, public memories “are never safe, never monologic, never allowed to remain stable for long” (p. 466).

Understanding public memory as performance and as social text highlights the elements of politics and power that shape and reify memories. Public memory as performance highlights the suasive elements of any attempt at creating or maintaining public memory: “Public memory is never given, but always managed; it is constructed in ways designed to accrue to the advantage of the constructors . . . [p]erformance embeds within itself a political imperative” (Browne, 1993, pp. 465-466). It also contains a measure of risk as elements of collective identity become tied to specific types of memory and the forms in which they are embedded: The struggle over, and performance of, public memory creates situations “where a host of rhetors and audiences are involved in the performative process of individual and collective identity” (Hasian, 2005, p. 256). When memories are discredited, the collective identities associated with them are threatened.

Because public memories are social texts, the suasive elements are open to examination (Browne, 1993). Any instance of public memory has a material form: “We find memories in objects, narratives about the past, even routines by which we structure our day” (Zelizer, 1998, p. 4). Journalistic trade publications trace out the profession’s collective memory of its routines and the identity embodied in it, a memory structured by metaphors of sports and military activity (Parameswaran, 2006). In addition to trade publications, commemorative speech, and memorials, public memory is embodied in film and television. The representations of gays and lesbians on television represent the concrete trace of a hegemonic public memory.

Because public memory is contestable, even the most pervasive memories can be challenged and changed. Most heteronormative and mainstream memory work has

tried to “forget” gays and lesbians (Castiglia, 2000; Gross, 1994, 2001; Russo, 1987), but this attempt has not been entirely successful. Traces of gays and lesbians in public memory do exist, but historically, they have not been positive. Most often, gays and lesbians are identified as villains or victims (Fejes & Petrich, 1993; Gross, 2001; Russo, 1987). Until recently, there have been almost no representations of gays or lesbians in the mainstream that showed them living lives of contentment. As Gross (2001) notes in relation to television and film in the mid-20th century, “Show me a happy homosexual, and I’ll show you a gay corpse” (p. 60). The public memory of gays and lesbians as victim—and the identity such memory constructed for them—effaces signs of gay and lesbian communities and make gay and lesbian individuals a problem encountered by heterosexuals. For example, Gross (2001) notes how the thriving gay community in the city of Philadelphia is erased from the movie *Philadelphia* (see also Dow, 2001; Walters, 2001). Tied to the effacing of the gay and lesbian community is the identification of gays and lesbians as a problem for heterosexual characters in a show or movie to “solve” and as a problem for heterosexual audiences to encounter. As Dow (2001) notes, gay characters “are never incidentally gay; they appeared in episodes or movies in which their sexuality was ‘the problem’ to be solved . . . [and] the problem they represent is depicted largely in terms of its effect on heterosexuals” (p. 129). Television treats gays and lesbians as a problem for heterosexuals to solve, and the solution is typically one of acceptance, often understood as resignation (see also Gross, 2001, p. 83). More recent televisual portrayals have moved somewhat away from the model outlined above, but these results still fall within a heteronormative frame. Although it does not represent its gay characters as problems for heterosexuals to encounter, the relationships between the main characters in the television comedy *Will & Grace* reinforce a heteronormative frame (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002). Although news images of man-on-man kissing in the news have brought queer sexuality out of the media closet, this visibility still works within an assimilationist and ultimately heteronormative frame (Morris & Sloop, 2006).<sup>1</sup>

The majority of memory work examined by queer media critics fashions gays and lesbians as powerless individuals. Heterosexual identity is strengthened by the contrast between the heterosexuals and powerless homosexuals and by successfully “solving” the problem a homosexual character represents. The material trace of this public memory can be found in television and movies, and this memory develops as it moves across various genres, such as television news and the movie-of-the-week.

### **Drafting Hegemonic Public Memory: *The Matthew Shepard Story* and Heteronormativity**

Public memory consists of repeated performances that are open to contestation. Public memory of gays and lesbians has typically portrayed them as either villain or victim and constructed their identity as a “problem” that is easily solved by heterosexuals. One common site for the expression of public memory has been television’s

movie-of-the-week (Dow, 2001; Gross, 2001; Schulze, 1990; Walters, 2001). This genre represents a second “draft” of a public memory, one that builds off the initial construction of an event in the news. This section will first discuss how news media represent a first draft of public memory and how that draft frames Shepard’s murder. Next, it will discuss the movie-of-the-week genre and how it elaborates on the memory drafted by the news media. Then, using the frame of the movie-of-the-week genre and previous studies of gay and lesbian representation, it will examine the embodiment of public memory of Shepard in *The Matthew Shepard Story*.

### **First Drafts: News Media and the Framing of Shepard’s Murder**

The first draft of many public memories develops in the news media, and movies-of-the-week are a second phase in the construction and contestation of public memory. According to Cuklanz (1996), news reports of emotionally powerful topics, such as rape and hate crimes, have three elements. First, news depends on one-dimensional depictions of the individuals involved. Second, it uses the dominant ideology to make judgments about the individuals involved. Third, the news coverage has strict temporal limits (i.e., coverage has little background material and focuses on events from the time the rape or hate crime is reported to the end of the trial).

In the case of Matthew Shepard’s murder, the news coverage works to scapegoat the murderers, Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney. Ott and Aoki (2002) show how media frames “relieve the public of its social complicity and culpability” in the murder and hampers gay and lesbian political and social advocacy (p. 484). Through the use of an episodic frame that highlights concrete moments and individuals over social trends, news reports of the murder centered the story around Shepard: “This was not, and never would become, a story about hate crimes in which Matthew Shepard was an example. It was a story about Shepard, in which hate was the motive for the violence” (p. 488). By framing Shepard as the fulcrum of the news coverage—instead of centering the topic of hate crimes—the coverage provided two vessels for public guilt, Henderson and McKinney. The news coverage casts the two men out of the broader (i.e., nonviolent) heterosexual community by noting their failure to complete high school, their violent pasts, and their abuse of drugs and alcohol. McKinney and Henderson become the means by which the public is purged of guilt and freed from considering those elements of the culture that make it culpable for the crime. These elements constitute the general tenor of heteronormative memory work surrounding Matthew Shepard.

### **Second Drafts: Writing Matthew Shepard Into the Movie-of-the-Week Genre**

*The Matthew Shepard Story* picks up where the news coverage ends. Fictional accounts are the second stage in creating public memory. Those that operate in the

movie-of-the-week genre operate in the same vein as the news coverage (Cuklanz, 1996). Although they provide more background on the central characters in the narrative, allow room for secondary characters, employ a broader time frame to flesh out the story, and even allow for greater articulation of progressive ideology, the story builds on the understandings already provided by prior news coverage of the event. In such a way, the movie-of-the-week creates “controversial noncontroversial TV movies—film that could titillate viewers without scandalizing them” (Gomery, 1987, p. 207).

To understand the drafting of memory in television, it is necessary to understand the context wherein much of that draft work occurs, the TV movie genre. The movie-of-the-week genre first appeared in the early 1960s in response to the lack of theatrical release movies available for broadcast on television (Gomery, 1987; Schulze, 1990). The movie-of-the-week proved its ability to make the networks significant profit with the broadcast of *Brian's Song* in 1971 (Gomery, 1987). Although popular press critics have derided the movie-of-the-week's aesthetic qualities, the genre has proven popular with audiences (Schulze, 1990).

Movies-of-the-week appear “as socially important documents, on the cutting edge of public debate, and, in fact, a focal point for engaging us, as a nation, in a much larger public sphere” (Rapping, 1992, p. xi). It is “topical entertainment reaffirming basic values and beliefs” (Gomery, 1987, p. 206). Most examples of the genre treat the family as the primary scene of action: “All other matters are subsumed into that never-questioned ideal situation” (Rapping, 1992, p. 34; see also Schulze, 1990, pp. 368-370). Even movies focused on public figures—great men of history—“manage to integrate the domestic lives of the heroes, the men who make history, with their political and historical acts” (Rapping, 1992, p. 35). Because they bring to light important social issues, movies-of-the-week have some progressive potential, but at the same time that they highlight progressive concerns, they contain this potential by approaching the issue so as not to offend a broad television audience. Because of this, the genre prefers “a personal individualistic sense of how even progressive change occurs” (Rapping, 1992, p. 40). When creating the memory of an event, the television movie-of-the-week creates a sense of continuity between a given event and all the others we remember: Against the backdrop of family life and the traditional values, one sees a central individual, with whom the audience identifies, struggle with socially progressive issues such as feminism, civil rights, and gay and lesbian movements. This act of memory creates a narrative that curtails the political response, transforming the call to broad social action into a call for individual change and acceptance of others, such as gays and lesbians, who have been ostracized.

*The Matthew Shepard Story* elaborates on the memory of Shepard's murder embodied in the news coverage of the event, and it deploys the typical means of representing gays and lesbians in the media. It first demonizes McKinney and Henderson, placing the blame squarely on them and absolving the larger community of responsibility for the murder. It then casts Matthew Shepard solely in the role of

victim. Finally, it portrays his family as the context within which to understand who Shepard was and also uses his father as a symbolic vehicle through which interpersonal “acceptance” solves the emotional “problem” caused by Matthew Shepard’s homosexuality.

The movie begins with a reenactment of Shepard’s beating. During this scene, McKinney and Henderson’s voices are distorted: They sound like animals, literally grunting and howling as they beat the helpless Shepard. Additionally, the movie goes into slow motion, making their actions appear unnatural and inhuman. From the very beginning of the film, the murderers have been sequestered from the human community, not to mention the community of straight, White residents of Laramie, Wyoming. In addition to this visual sequestration, the comments of the characters of Dennis and Judy Shepard place the onus of the crime solely on the two. After the jury delivers a guilty verdict in Aaron McKinney’s case, Judy Shepard tells Dennis, “I was in that courtroom. I know what they did to him.” Later, the couple is first informed about a possible sentencing agreement that would commute McKinney’s death sentence to life in prison. Dennis exclaims, “Did he show any mercy when he beat my kid to death?!?” These visual elements and dialogue dehumanize McKinney and Henderson, place blame squarely on them, and helps relieve the public of any culpability for the crime.

The creation of Matthew Shepard as victim is interwoven with elements that simultaneously create the family as the scene within which to understand Shepard and the heterosexual parents’ point of view as the one best able to make sense of his life. Matthew Shepard’s life is shown in a series of flashbacks. Viewers see Matthew return from the prom and then get repudiated by his date for not kissing her. Later, viewers see Matthew raped by men in Morocco, assaulted and harassed by his neighbors while living in Denver, and then McKinney and Henderson luring Shepard out of the bar in Laramie. The majority of these scenes are told from the mother’s point of view. She provides the voiceover that begins most of the flashbacks and places them within the context of victimage. The first voiceover, which occurs as Matthew returns from prom, establishes the theme of hardship and victimage, which intensifies during the course of the movie: “Part of me thinks I always knew Matthew was gay. Maybe that’s hindsight, but I am sure things changed in high school. Life got harder for him.” This and successive scenes establish that Matthew’s life is predominately one of hardship, victimage, and suffering. To highlight these scenes is not to dispute their factual accuracy. Rather, the overwhelming emphasis on Matthew Shepard’s status as victim erases other important elements of him from public memory and reinforces conceptions of gays and lesbians as victims that continually circulate in public memory. The majority of the nonvictimage scenes that include Matthew Shepard focus primarily on his interaction with his family. Before going to the prom, Matthew says, “I want to watch the game with dad here.” Other scenes show Shepard hunting and camping with his parents. These images, which focus on stereotypically heterosexual and “butch” behaviors, firmly establish the family, especially the parents, as the proper locus for understanding and accepting who Matthew Shepard was.

The emphasis on family also allows another convention of gay and lesbian representation to come into play: the creation of homosexuality as a problem for heterosexuals. In addition to portraying the Shepards' emotional struggle over asking for the death penalty for Aaron McKinney, the television movie also portrays the Shepards' struggle to understand and accept their son. True to form, Matthew's homosexuality becomes a problem for the parents, especially the father. This first appears when the parents are discussing what to include in their statement about Matthew's life. His father objects to including information about Matthew's same-sex relationship at boarding school:

I just don't want them thinking he was some kind of priss. He wasn't. [Judy fixes him with a piercing look.] I don't . . . I didn't mean it like that. I'm just saying that this is a Wyoming jury. He loved the outdoors. Why don't we just focus on that?

The father is concerned about the perception of his son as feminine or a "priss." He wants to focus on stereotypically masculine interests. The father's discomfort with his son's sexuality is made more apparent later in the film. After Matthew is sexually assaulted in Morocco and finishes boarding school, his parents take him camping to give him emotional support. He complains that his life will never improve because of how people perceive him:

Matthew: That's how everybody thinks about me. That's what I am. I'm a queer! I'm a homo!

Dennis: Alright, we get it. You're gay, alright?

Matthew: I do it with other guys, Dad. [pause; Dennis looks somber] What do you have to say about that? [Dennis remains silent] That's my point.

Dennis's discomfort is transformed into understanding and acceptance of his son almost immediately after this flashback when he hears a joke about gay people in a bar:

I've been thinking about Matthew all day. Tonight, it was like he was right there beside me. I heard it the way he would have, and you know what, it isn't a joke. It's a little piece of hate shot like an arrow. My God, how did this kid do it? How many arrows struck him everyday? They fall off you and me, Judy. I've even told a joke like that before, but they were shot right at him. My God, I never knew how he felt. I never knew at all. I thought I did, but I didn't.

With the realization of his own behavior and what those jokes really mean for gays and lesbians, Dennis Shepard is portrayed as coming to terms with and accepting his son's homosexuality, but the evolution of Dennis Shepard's attitude stops with acceptance. Political activism or community involvement does not appear here, despite the fact that the Shepards have become activists since Matthew's death.



So far, I have highlighted the shortcomings of *The Matthew Shepard Story*, but as others note, the movie-of-the-week—of which *The Matthew Shepard Story* is an exemplar—has a positive aspect. The movie provides a positive portrayal of a gay man, Matthew Shepard, and it has a pro-gay and an antideath penalty stance. It illuminates a set of contentious social issues and provides a somewhat progressive story, though one limited by its framework of individualism. It also provides powerful identification for a straight audience with Shepard's parents, especially Judy Shepard. Yet this movie constructs a public memory that has serious limitations. Matthew Shepard is solely a victim whose primary connection to other people is through his family. No other people play as important a role in his life. In identifying with the heroic and aggrieved parents, homosexuality becomes a problem that heterosexuals must confront, and acceptance becomes the appropriate response to that problem. With the presentation of McKinney and Henderson as animals, the onus of hate crime lies solely with individuals. Even though the movie shows Dennis Shepard horrified to hear antigay jokes in a bar, the connection between those jokes, a heteronormative culture, and hate crime is not established. According to this story, hate crime occurs, not because of culture but because of a flaw in an individual's character. This movie creates a public memory that blends seamlessly with existing public memory of homosexuality. Blame has been apportioned and the guilty punished. Only one response becomes available to straight people (i.e., acceptance), and only one role becomes available for gays and lesbians (i.e., victimhood).

### **Redrafting Public Memory: *The Laramie Project***

Although *The Matthew Shepard Story* follows the path from news coverage to television movie to create a heteronormative public memory of Shepard and, through him, gays and lesbians, HBO's *The Laramie Project* represents an attempt to create a more progressive public memory. *The Laramie Project* does not follow the generic conventions of the movie-of-the-week. It does not have any one central character or handful of characters around whom the action revolves. In fact, there is no real action in this adaptation of Moises Kaufman's play. It consists of selections from interviews with the residents of Laramie, Wyoming, during the year after Shepard's murder. In flaunting the generic conventions of the television movie, *The Laramie Project* creates an alternative public memory. Unlike counterpublic memory, which is tied to a specific group that exists in opposition to, or outside of, the broader, generalized public, alternative public memory emphasizes the oppositional and contested nature of public memory within a single community. Here, the public or community is the broadly identified "American" public as it is constituted through mass media, especially television. As a performative, social text, this alternative undermines the traditional elements and representations that constitute the accepted

public memory of homosexuals and provides a new type of memory. Drafting this new memory involves two steps: rewriting memory of gays and lesbians and revising understandings of heterosexuality and heteronormativity.

## Rewriting Gay and Lesbian Memory

*The Laramie Project* uses the vehicle of Matthew Shepard and Laramie's reaction to him to rewrite memories of gays and lesbians in two ways. First, it offers representations of Matthew Shepard that emphasize roles other than that of victim. Second, it offers a vision of the gay and lesbian community that counters their erasure from heteronormative public memory.

*Matthew Shepard as other-than-victim.* As part of the creation of an alternative public memory, *The Laramie Project* breaks with the conventional representation of gay men. This requires broadening the representation of Matthew Shepard to show him as something other than a victim. Although it is true that Shepard was the victim of a terrible crime, it is problematic to reduce his entire life to victimhood, as *The Matthew Shepard Story* does. The image of Shepard is expanded when members of the theater company first meet people who knew Shepard. As one company member notes, it was the "first time someone referred to him as 'Matt' instead of 'Matthew.'" The change in naming strategy begins to break the audience away from the depiction of Shepard in the media to this point. It provides an entrée into other ways of talking about Shepard, which appear in the next scene. A driver for a limousine service in Laramie describes Shepard and how they first met: "Matt was a blunt little shit, you know what I'm saying? A little guy . . . five foot two. Soakin' wet, maybe 97 pounds tops. They were saying he weighed 110 pounds, but I don't believe it." This image of Shepard as "a blunt little shit" troubles a simplistic image of Shepard as victim. There is more to Matthew Shepard than perpetual victimhood. This expanded image of Shepard is reinforced at two other points in the movie. First, there is an interview with Shepard's academic advisor who talks about Shepard's interest in politics. The second involves a friend of Shepard who recounts Shepard's obsessive watching of CNN and MSNBC. Both scenes highlight another aspect of Shepard's character that is slighted in the conventional construction of public memory about Shepard as a victim.

*Depicting gay community.* In the conventional public memory, gays and lesbians appear as isolated individuals. Existing public memory typically elides any awareness of a gay community. *The Laramie Project* provides images of a gay and lesbian community. In the last quarter of the movie, members of the theater company are shown eating dinner with gay and lesbian residents of Laramie. A lesbian professor interviewed earlier in the movie is the hostess. She tells the theater company members that gatherings such as the one they are attending are new for Laramie's gay and lesbian community. Others attribute the gatherings to Matthew Shepard. In

the wake of his death, gays and lesbians in Laramie realized that their silence and separation would not help them or protect them, so they had begun to band together. They still faced fear. One lesbian couple indicated that they do not let their son play outside after dark for fear of an attack, and another lesbian said “her heart jumps up into her throat every time a pickup truck does a U-turn.” Yet in the face of these fears, they have created a community that did not exist previously and does not exist in other media representations of gays and lesbians.

### Revising Heterosexuality and Heteronormativity

As a corollary to making gays and lesbians visible in nonstereotypical, nonstandard ways, this alternative public memory—this rewriting of the social text—also must undermine the privileged position of heterosexuality and heteronormativity. It first does this by attacking the values metonymically encoded in the vision of the West generally and Laramie specifically. Then, it reveals the heteronormative and homophobic language and beliefs of Laramie’s residents.<sup>2</sup>

*Demythologizing (heterosexual) place.* The stark beauty of Laramie’s environs invokes the American pioneer mythos. The cowboy and a “can-do” individualism are embodied in those images of Laramie and the stark grandeur of the West. At the very beginning of the movie, after two voiceovers where people declare their shock and horror at the attack on Matthew Shepard, a theater student from the University of Wyoming says,

If you had asked me before, I would have said Laramie was a beautiful town—secluded. You could have your own identity. Now, after Matthew, we are a town defined by an accident, a crime, you know. We’ve become Waco or Jasper, you know.

The emphasis on scene—its beauty, its expansiveness—develops into characteristics of the people in Laramie: Seclusion leads to individualism and “your own identity.” The ethic of “live and let live” also receives a great deal of emphasis. At least three different individuals use that phrase. Although this ethic ideally creates a space for nonheterosexuals, one of Laramie’s gay residents reveal the hypocrisy of the ideal:

There’s this idea: you leave me alone, I leave you alone. It’s even in some of the Western literature. You know, “live and let live.” That is such crap! What it boils down to is “I don’t tell you I’m a fag, and you don’t beat the crap out of me.” What’s so great about that? That’s a great philosophy?

Straight residents of Laramie make the same admission indirectly when they express shock that the murderers came from Laramie. An older rancher’s wife says, “Well, when I learned that they had grown up in Laramie, I was just floored.” If the

murderers were from out of town, they would not be expected to hold to the ideal of “live and let live,” but residency in Laramie becomes a metonym for the ethic. One female resident of Laramie makes this logic explicit near the end of the movie: “My secret hope was that they were from somewhere else, and then you can create this distance: ‘We don’t grow children like that here.’ Well, it’s pretty clear we do grow children like that here.”

*Problematizing heteronormativity.* Although outrage at the crime and the violation of the ethics embodied in Laramie appears in a number of places throughout the film, residents of Laramie reveal a number of heteronormative attitudes that justify discrimination against gays and lesbians and, ultimately, violence. By making these attitudes explicit, the movie works to denaturalize them and make them unpalatable for the audience, ultimately problematizing the heteronormative structure in which (presumably) they participate.

The movie begins with statements of shock over the murder and compassion for the victim. Yet immediately after a montage of individuals making these statements, the movie cuts to an old man outside a bar who says, “Some people are saying he made a pass at them [McKinney and Henderson]. Hell, you don’t pick up regular people.” Homophobic statements such as these attempt to make Matthew Shepard culpable for his murder. He tried to pick up “regular”—heterosexual—people. Shepard becomes “irregular” and abnormal because of his sexuality, and his actions become the grounds for a censure that could possibly condone violence.

Some residents who spoke supportively of Matthew Shepard near the beginning of the movie later reveal they hold attitudes similar to those of the old man at the bar. For example, a female rancher, who earlier condemned the murder, and her husband rail against the gay community:

Husband: I think the gay community is taking this as an advantage. [It has] said, “This is a good time for us to exploit this.”

Wife: They made it sound like it was 10 murders instead of one.

Husband: They are accusing the ranchers of being unreasonable and unsympathetic, because of how he was . . .

Wife: . . . and what his persuasions were.

In this scene, the rancher couple tries to minimize the importance of Matthew Shepard’s murder. Despite the brutality and the premeditation that went into the attack, they treat it like any other murder, which means the response is out of proportion to the action. This should strike a false chord with the audience, especially given the movie has just moved from a scene where the brutality of the attack is detailed.

In some cases, the condemnation of the attack and an attack on Shepard occur almost simultaneously. For example:

- Woman: Nobody deserves that. I don't care who you are. But, I have to tell ya, the media is portraying him as a saint. They are making him out as a martyr, and I don't think he was.
- Interviewer: Did you know him?
- Woman: [smile] No, I didn't know him, but there's just so many things I didn't know about him. It's just scary. You know, about his character and spreading AIDS and a few other things, you know, about the kind of person he was.
- Interviewer: Meaning?
- Woman: He was . . . he was just . . . [cough] a *barfly*. So I think he pushed himself on around, or . . . I don't know. I think he flaunted it.

Although no one deserves to suffer such brutality, Matthew Shepard, according to this woman who did not know him, asked for it by “flaunting” his sexuality. Once again, the community at large ignores its own ethic and displays its heterosexism and homophobia by trying to paint Shepard as a hypersexualized—and thus somewhat “villainous”—homosexual (Gross, 2001; Russo, 1987; Walters, 2001). This last point is emphasized when the woman denies that the murder is a hate crime: “If you murder someone you hate ‘em. *It has nothing to do if you are gay or a prostitute*” (emphasis added). For this woman, “hate crime” is an empty category and being gay is the equivalent of prostitution.

In addition to these revelations about some of Laramie's residents, some characters in the movie make a connection between Laramie and the whole country. One of the theater company members, describing the drive into Laramie, says, “This could be any main street in America.” She emphasizes the generic nature of the scene. Because of its commonplace nature, Laramie's main street becomes a synecdoche for all main streets, and Laramie stands in for all of America during the examination of attitudes and beliefs that continues through the movie. With the identification between Laramie and America established early in the movie, the space is cleared where one can lay the blame for the murder of Matthew Shepard at the feet of Laramie and, through the town, America. This occurs in a young woman's description of a candlelight vigil:

Somebody got up there and said, “Come on guys, let's show them that Laramie is not this kind of town.” But it *is* this kind of town. If it wasn't this kind of town, then why did this happen here? That's a lie, because it happened here. How can it *not* be the kind of town where this kind of thing happens? How can you even say that? We have to mourn this, and we have to be sad that we live in a town—a state, a country—where shit like this happens. I mean, these people are trying to distance themselves from this crime, and we need to own this crime, I feel. Everyone needs to own it. We are like this. We are like this! WE! ARE! LIKE! THIS!!

This part of the movie performs three functions. First, it enacts a scene-agent ratio. The town of Laramie is a place where hate crimes occur, and residents derive

their nature from their place (“we are like this!”). Second, it enacts a synecdoche, making Laramie stand in for Wyoming and then for the United States as a whole, so that the entire country must mourn the hate crime and come to “own” it. Finally, the monologue highlights that something in the character of the town, state and country fosters hate crimes against gays and lesbians: without saying it explicitly, the blame for the crime is placed on the nation’s heteronormativity.

## The Project of Writing Public Memory

Public memory is drafted. It goes through many revisions and rewrites. Many of these merely elaborate on existing themes, although the possibility for more radical rewritings—for the contestation of hegemonic public memory—is implied in the drafting process. This struggle over the collective identity and public memory of gays and lesbians plays out in the competing television movies about the murder of Matthew Shepard. This allows us to sketch out the contours of hegemonic and progressive public memories and note some inherent limitations of television as a vehicle for progressive memory work.

Hegemonic public memory is characterized by elaboration and conventionality. The public memory of gays and lesbians traced out by fictional forms elaborates on the draft of public memory found in television news: Themes and narrative elements are repeated and examined in greater depth by made-for-television movies and other vehicles where gays and lesbians are remembered hegemonically. Repetition of the same themes in news coverage of an event, such as Matthew Shepard’s murder, and the fictionalized response to it, such as *The Matthew Shepard Story*, is one sign of hegemonic public memory. The second draft of public memory is also marked by its conventionality of form and representational content. This examination reaffirms the recognition in previous scholarly work that adherence to the television movie genre gives voice to progressive impulses in order to ultimately contain them. This study also contributes to a broader conclusion that most, if not all, generic forms work to limit any progressive impact “positive” storylines might have on gay and lesbian representation (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002; Dow, 2001). In addition to remaining squarely within a genre, hegemonic public memory work recapitulates some, if not all, of the traditional depictions of gay and lesbian characters: casting them as victims or villains, treating them as a problem for heterosexuals to solve, and making the family the primary scene for understanding them (Dow, 2001; Fejes & Petrich, 1993; Gross, 2001; Russo, 1987).

Progressive enactments of alternative public memory break away from the draft of public memory found in the news, and they eschew typical generic forms. Progressive public memories of gays and lesbians will engage in some of the following. They do not allow for easy identification with one character, instead offering a multitude of viewpoints. As part of that multiplication of viewpoints, they also explicitly showcase queer/gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered (GLBT) individuals

and communities, or central components of a queer identity. They also decenter heterosexuality in two ways: stripping away the mythology surrounding heterosexual places and problematizing heteronormative attitudes by making them explicit and open to critique. *The Laramie Project* enacts all of these strategies, and some of these strategies or analogues of them can also be found in the movie *Boys Don't Cry*. According to Brenda Cooper (2002), the movie demythologizes heterosexual place and problematizes heteronormativity through its critique of the American heartland and its portrayal of heteromascularity's negative aspects. The movie does not offer multiple viewpoints or an image of queer community, but its focus on female masculinity is an analogue to the portrayal of queer identity and community. Future enactments of progressive public memory should incorporate some, if not all, of these strategies and use *The Laramie Project* and *Boys Don't Cry* as exemplars.

*The Laramie Project* can act as an exemplar for drafting a more progressive public memory, but it also highlights the mechanisms of the television industry that limit the reach of progressive public memories. Alternative public memories are more likely to be restricted to cable television, especially pay channels, and are less likely to appear on network television. As Gross (2001) notes, American broadcast television has depended on a "familiar strategy of assembling a large, common-denominator audience to sell to advertisers" (p. 255). The goal of mainstream broadcast channels "is to remain just at the edge of cultural change, not too far out in front of most people (especially those in their target audience), but not too far behind either" (p. 258). The edge of cultural change is, in part, defined by genre. This means that broadcast networks might not risk funding and broadcasting shows that do not fit easily understood formulas, and audiences might not invest the energy and work necessary to understand and interpret messages that fall outside of the easily packaged generic conventions.

Channels on cable television, especially pay channels, work under a different economic model that allows them to offer edgier and more progressive shows. *The Laramie Project* aired on HBO, which along with Showtime, has aired a number of movies that offer alternative and counterhegemonic representations of GLBT individuals. Specifically, HBO aired the made-for-television movie "If These Walls Could Talk 2," which explored the lives of three different lesbian couples who inhabited the same house at different times in the 20th century and the television adaptation of Tony Kushner's award-winning play "Angels in America." HBO and other pay cable channels such as Showtime can offer more progressive representations of the GLBT/queer community, whereas networks such as NBC are offering more mainstream and heteronormative fare.

Yet the dynamics of producing hegemonic and progressive public memories should not be reduced to a broadcast/cable distinction, where broadcast television is hegemonic and cable is progressive. For example, Bravo's *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* challenges heteronormative masculinity only to limit the progressive thrust of this representation by replacing it with a consumer-based masculinity

(Clarkson, 2005). Furthermore, progressive counterpublic memories will not receive an airing in cable or broadcast television because the ties to specific groups and the textual markers that identify specific group affiliations limit the potential broadcast audience. The ties to a specific community, marked as outside the mainstream, will deter broadcasters, except in the most selective niche markets.

Despite these limitations, television—whether broadcast television or cable television—remains a key site for drafting and redrafting public memory of gays and lesbians. It is a site that must be continually engaged by those struggling against the consequences of heteronormativity. Alternative public memory, though limited, represents the best means to improve how all nonheterosexual individuals are represented and remembered.

## Notes

1. The show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* does provide a challenge to heteronormativity and heteronormative masculinity, but it “reidealizes American manhood as one that is predicated on effete style and taste and mandates a visually upper-class identity as a key component of hegemonic masculinity” (Clarkson, 2005, p. 252). Radical potential in the show is contained by reshaping gay and straight representation on a model of consumerism.

2. The move to attack the values embodied by Laramie and its residents parallels the move to demythologize the heartland discussed by Cooper (2002).

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**John Lynch** (PhD, University of Georgia) is an assistant professor at the University of Cincinnati. His work examines public representations of gays and lesbians and public understanding of science, especially embryonic stem cell research and the intersection of genetics and race.