



“There are Parts I Won’t Tell You”: Biography, Trauma and Violence in Moisés Kaufman’s *The Laramie Project*

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ABSTRACT

The murder of Matthew Shepard, in Laramie, Wyoming, in 1998, was the traumatic event that inspired Moisés Kaufman to write *The Laramie Project*. The author travelled to Laramie and built the play based on interviews with the townspeople. This essay examines the connection between verbatim theatre and biographical writing and the ways in which these connections and touching boundaries can be a valuable strategy in the depictions of personal and collective trauma, as well as forms of institutionalized and structural violence. The essay will explore the community’s relation to the hate crime committed and make clear the relation of the community with questions regarding homosexuality and homophobia. Through the analysis it will aim at rendering visible the community’s dealing with the shadow of intolerance cast over them and not just those directly involved in Matthew Shepard’s murder, while trying to distance themselves from a collective identity of brutality. The theoretical considerations carried throughout result from the attention to challenges that non-normativity poses on both individual and collective levels.

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*After all, not to create only, or found only,
 But to bring perhaps from afar what is already founded,
 To give it our own identity, average, limitless, free.*

– Walt Whitman¹

Generally speaking, associating the words “based on a true story” or “based on true events” to a piece of writing or media is a strategy to incite audiences’ interest. Often, these kinds of stories relate to episodes that depict some kind of trauma, violence, or even brutal events. Somehow, especially in these cases, some people often crave for the voyeuristic pleasure they can get from reading or watching these events from a safe and comfortable position. In more recent years we have seen a proliferation of ‘true crime’ narratives in multiple types of media that can attest to this. On the other hand, standing upon an activist positioning, some of these works aim at affecting the audience in a way that is more engaging and that can surpass the element of spectacle in the hope of revealing and questioning broader social and cultural issues.

With this in mind, this essay will provide an analysis of *The Laramie Project*, a play written by Moisés Kaufman and members of the Tectonic Theater Project. The play that opened in 2000 has also been adapted to a film commissioned by HBO, premiering at the Sundance Film Festival in 2002. It results from a collaborative effort between Kaufman and the Tectonic Theater Project, in which Kaufman and members of the company travelled to Laramie, Wyoming, six times, developing the play for a year and a half. During these trips, Kaufman and the group conducted over two hundred interviews with people from the town of Laramie, which were then transcribed and edited. Then, they organized workshops in which the members of the company presented the material and acted as playwrights for the creation of the play. What these interviews were about however regards a less fruitful collective effort – the brutal murder of Matthew Shepard, in October 1998. On the night of October 7th, Shepard, a 21-year-old student at the University of Wyoming was brutally attacked by Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson and left to die tied to a fence in a field outside Laramie. Shepard was found 18 hours later and taken to the hospital, where he died on October 12th.²

Structurally, this essay will provide an account of the Matthew Shepard case supported by references to Kaufman’s play. As will become clear throughout the essay, drama is an affective medium that works to stimulate the audience’s empathy and emotions. Hence, the considerations exposed over the construction and intentionality of the play concerning the depicted events will create the conditions to bring to the fore forms of feeling and dealing with feelings that I will explore with the critical tools proposed by the area of affect studies. Affect is found in “encounters between bodies that involve a change – either in enhancement or diminishment – in their respective bodily capacities” (Slaby and Mühlhoff, 27). Although this definition of body is not limited to the skin-cased physical body, Shepard’s murder can be understood as the traumatic result from a negatively charged affective encounter between opposing bodies – representing the queer body *versus* the homophobic body. Ultimately, the goal is to examine the connection between verbatim theatre and biographical writing and the ways in which these connections and touching boundaries are a good resort for the representation of personal and collective trauma, and forms of institutionalized and structural violence that blur the frontier separating the personal from the political.

The more traditional approach to the representation of trauma was proposed by Cathy Caruth in the 1990s. In Caruth’s assessment, trauma is unspeakable, “an event whose force is marked by its lack of registration” (6), and in this conception the idea that traumatic memories elude straightforward verbal representation prevails. Scholarship on writing about trauma has

¹ This epigraph can be found in Moisés Kaufman’s “Introduction” to the play, published by Dramatists Play Services Inc. It is an excerpt from a poem originally recited for opening the Fortieth Annual Exhibition, American Institute, New York, 1871. Published under the title “After All Not to Create Only”, in the *New York Evening Post* on September 7, 1871.

² The story behind Matthew Shepard’s murder can be integrally found on the website of the Matthew Shepard Foundation, which aims to inspire individuals and organizations to work for equality and stop hate crimes: <https://www.matthewshepard.org>. The Matthew Shepard Foundation supports productions of *The Laramie Project* across the United States.

evolved since then even if it has not always been consensual. For an example of the ambiguity on writing about trauma, I borrow Colin Davis's words on the ethics of telling the Other's story:

We should not have the arrogance to assume that we can share some part of what happened to the victims. And yet not to speak for those who have been silenced, not to recall, not to study what happened to them in the hope of learning something from their stories, would be an act of barbarity in itself, hideously complicit with the forces which sought to eliminate them. (11)

This idea is adequate to describe the effort from the theatre company, as it aimed at creating a form of remembrance and to study what happened in Laramie, particularly as it was the result from a homophobic hate-crime. Keeping this perspective in mind, the considerations on the representation of trauma present in this essay are not entirely focused on the ethics of writing about trauma but are concerned with motivations and what this type of writing aims at in Kaufman's text, which can ultimately be thought of as a prodding of empathy on the audience. My views are aligned with Joshua Pederson's framing of the field, which distances itself from Caruth's conception. In the particular case of *The Laramie Project*, the victim of the actual event is no longer able to be the speaking subject, to either grasp or describe the details, but the traumatic event itself did not cease to exist and left a mark in Laramie. It is up to the theatre company to transform verbal accounts of the event into narrative form and performance. In Pederson's view: "[r]eaders who accept the restorative power of language are likely to see the literature of trauma not as a collection of faltering or failing speech acts but instead as efforts – no matter how halting – at rehabilitation." (339). What is at stake here is the portrayal of how the community deals with the traumatic event. This position is paralleled by Diana Taylor's judgment that: "trauma-driven performances offer victims, survivors, and human rights activists ways to address the society-wide repercussions of violent politics and also, indirectly, to relieve personal pain." (1674). This was the intention behind Kaufman's endeavour – not a voyeuristic approach to a spectacle of violence but a way to address the repercussions of a local act that can reveal something about a broader reality, about the community of Laramie and its specific characteristics.

The view of the community as a specific framework, aligned with the previously mentioned structural forms of trauma and violence, echoes Raymond Williams's notion of structures of feeling, opening a discussion on the continuous enforcement of violence upon identities that stray the norm. In this view, the quality of social experiences and relationships can be associated with the sense of a generation or period – and I would argue, with a community or group – and the relations and the changes that occur within that particular context can be defined as changes in 'structures of feeling'. According to Williams, the active readings of artistic productions that deal with social experiences and relationships are especially relevant because they produce:

[m]eanings and values as they are actively lived and felt, and the relations between these and formal systematic beliefs are in practice variable ... 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. (23)

Kaufman's text can thus be seen as an attempt to depict Laramie as a specific structure – a sample that aims at inferring on the national reality – that enables the audience to understand the interlocking tensions that are liminal with violence, and how much the structure affects the individual experience. Hence, the affective components in Kaufman's work help make sense of the depicted experiences and relations as cultural processes, that is, as structures of feeling. Williams's concept has paved the way for an understanding of cultural phenomena that encompasses a multitude of emotional categories – affects – as not being strictly subjective but instead as being reflected in the interaction with the social and cultural realms.

The structural violence rooted in some communities can reinforce personal traumas, which raises the question: how much of a personal tragedy is personal and how much can one individual traumatic experience tell of a social structure of violence? This is particularly important to consider as, since the cultural struggle over conservative cultural politics – namely the Reagan Era – that aim at diluting the oppositional discourses of the historically stereotyped citizens,

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 (Berlant 2). Works like *The Laramie Project*, allow for reflection on processes of stigmatization of the Other, following Imogen Tyler's observation that it is necessary to understand "how this state-cultivated stigma changes the ways in which people think about themselves and others – corroding compassion, crushing hope, weakening social solidarity." (7) The State dictates morally charged social and cultural scripts which can either validate or punish certain acts and behaviours. The labelling of sexual difference as inherently wrong and a deviation from moral order is one of the markers that enforces this dichotomy between valid and punishable acts. This is what we find in Kaufman's work: sexual difference as a marker of exclusion that enables the stigmatization of members of the community. Stigmatization can make people think of the Other as morally abject, as inferior beings.

Taken to extreme, it becomes even more dangerous if evolves into a process of dehumanization. In this conception that I borrow from David Livingstone Smith, people view different members of society not "really [as] people at all, but rather as less-than-human beings that it is morally permissible, or even obligatory, to harm or to kill." (Smith ch. 1). Ultimately, this was the effect of homophobia for the two attackers of Matthew Shepard. Smith points out that "dehumanization stands at the interface between the political and the personal, to address it fully requires one to explore the interface between political processes and human behaviour, and in particular it requires one to address the nature of propaganda and ideology." (ch. 1). I believe it is interesting to bear this perspective in mind when considering the depictions in *The Laramie Project*. The violent attack on Matthew Shepard makes evident how structurally instilled political views of homosexuality as abject can collide with an individual's intimate realm.

According to Kaufman himself, one of the motivations behind *The Laramie Project* was in fact his questioning of the connection between what happened in Laramie, Wyoming, and the rest of the nation:

The brutal murder of Matthew Shepard was another event of this kind. In its immediate aftermath, the nation launched into a dialogue that brought to the surface how we think and talk about homosexuality, sexual politics, education, class, violence, privileges and rights, and the difference between tolerance and acceptance.

The idea for *The Laramie Project* originated in my desire to learn more about why Matthew Shepard was murdered; about what happened that night; about the town of Laramie. The idea of listening to the citizens talk really interested me. How is Laramie different from the rest of the country and how is it similar? (11)

This notion of listening to the way citizens talk is an integral part of the verbatim theatre genre. Verbatim theatre was defined by Derek Paget as a form of "documentary drama which employs (largely or exclusively) tape-recorded material from the 'real-life' originals of the characters and events to which it gives dramatic shape" (Paget 317). Of course, one must be careful when making such claims as there is always the risk of accounting a 'constructed interview' as truthful. According to Rony Robinson, a pioneer of this subgenre of documentary drama, in verbatim theatre the taping and transcription of interviews must be done in the context of research:

[I]nto a particular region, subject area, issue, event, or combination of these things. This primary source is then transformed into a text which is acted, usually by the performers who collected the material in the first place.

As often as not, such plays are then fed back into the communities (which have, in a real sense, created them), via performance in those communities. In Verbatim Theatre, the firmest of commitments is thus made by the company to the use of vernacular speech, recorded as the primary source material of their play. (Robin qtd. in Paget 317)

In this case, the community aspect is fundamental. For the creation of *The Laramie Project* the community feeds the artwork, and the artwork feeds back into the community. In fact, the awareness of this twofold dimension of verbatim theatre for some community members interviewed by Kaufman and the company, influenced the way in which they provided

information or wanted the(ir) story to be told. When Marge Murray learns from one of the members of the Tectonic that they intend to present the play in Laramie once they are done, she tells him: “Okay, then, there are parts I won’t tell you.” (Kaufman 30). Something that I believe is very important to consider about Kaufman’s text is what is not there. This is to say that the text we are presented with lacks stories and perspectives that were deliberately left out by the interviewed people that would not want to reveal too much to an unknown theatre group. Melissa Febos points out that “resistance to memoir about trauma is always in part — and often nothing but — a resistance to movements for social justice” (ch. 1). In the aftermath of a very mediatic tragedy, it was likely that some of the townsfolk would be resistant in their sharing, considering how the image of the town would transpire.

The *collage* of interviews anchors the central storyline to a dramaturgical structure. Through the combination of multiple points of view of a single event provided by the community, the audiences are offered a narrative that is up for “social deliberation in an alternate public sphere, thereby creating a theatre of public dialogue”. (Jackson qtd. in Heddon 115). This dramaturgical structure allows for a shift of focus in a single protagonist to the greater community’s shared storyline (Claycomb *apud* Heddon 115).

At this point, there are two important questions to be considered henceforth: how does *The Laramie Project* render visible the community’s relation to the hate crime committed? In other words, how does it portray the relation of the community with issues of homosexuality and intolerance? Second, how does it render visible the collective trauma resulting from Matthew Shepard’s murder that affects a broader portion of the community of Laramie, and not just those directly involved? After all, in the weeks following the incident many eyes of the nation were set on Laramie and associated the hate crime and intolerance to the collective atmosphere of the town. According to records available on *History*: “Matthew Shepard’s death sparked national outrage and renewed calls for extending hate crime laws to cover violence based on a person’s sexual orientation. President Clinton implored Congress to pass the Hate Crimes Prevention Act in the wake of the incident.” However, to this day Wyoming remains one of five U.S. states that has no law against hate crimes (Sheerin).³ This is indissociable from a consideration on how structural forms of hate and violence are institutionalized in America. Hence, through verbatim theatre, the use of material from interviews gives the townsfolk of Laramie a chance to save the community’s face. However, herein lies the implications and ethics of ‘truth’. As I do not believe this essay is the place for a discussion of the ethics of truth, or ethics of remembering in dramaturgy of biographical writings, I will briefly address what it is that leads audiences to take what they see as ‘true’.

In both the written text of the play, distributed by Dramatists Play Service Inc., and the stage interpretation, Kaufman finds strategies to inform the audience/reader/producer of the play about the intention of the theatre company to access the feelings of the townsfolk of Laramie, which in turn can inform of a bigger picture regarding sexual politics and tolerance in America. Whether this intention is fulfilled or not, it aims at creating a pact between the author and the reader, something akin to Philippe Lejeune’s formulation of the autobiographical pact in which in order to create an autobiography, the author enters into a pact or contract with the reader, promising to give a detailed account of his or her life; a contract which determines the mode of reading of the text (Lejeune 29). Coining the term auto/biographical to verbatim theatre “is entirely apt since the words spoken are taken from people’s reflections on events connected with their own lives (their autobiographies, then), whilst the representation of these by writers/actors casts the process as biographical.” (Heddon 115). Hence, if we follow Lejeune’s considerations, and because the reading of auto/biography, much like affect, is always relational, we can postulate that what happens in a work like *The Laramie Project* is that the audiences agree to ‘read’ the given biography as truthful. This hybrid dramatic genre bestows a way upon which audiences can access the depicted events, as it strives to create an *in loco* atmosphere. The verisimilitude that comes from the appropriation of vernacular language from those interviewed functions has an effect of reality as it evokes a particular space, time and characters.

3 In 2009, President Obama signed into law the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act, which seeks to provide “funding and technical assistance to state, local, and tribal jurisdictions to help them to more effectively investigate and prosecute hate crimes.” (<https://www.justice.gov/crt/matthew-shepard-and-james-byrd-jr-hate-crimes-prevention-act-2009-0>. Accessed on January 25th, 2023).

So, how does Kaufman's text provide us with a broader picture of a community dealing with a traumatic, brutal event while trying to detach their collective identity from intolerance and brutality?

Although the idea behind *The Laramie Project* is to examine the town's reaction regarding the attack on Matthew Shepard and how much of what goes down in Laramie is reflected at national level, in the democratising tradition of verbatim theatre Kaufman's play gives the stage to the voices of oppressed and oppressors. David Hare characterizes verbatim drama as a medium able to give "a voice to the voiceless" (Hare 317). Although the restorative process or social intervention of verbatim drama should not be simplistically assumed, when we consider that verbatim dramas often represent untold stories, this positioning is understandable. Marginalized communities can find a site in the model of verbatim drama for their stories to be heard; furthering Deirdre Heddon's argument: "[p]ractitioners solicit the unsolicited, giving those unheard voices a public place, and perhaps then rewriting the dominant narratives in the process (narratives of history, social justice, community)." (Heddon 116) In the case of *The Laramie Project*, Matthew Shepard's voice cannot be heard, but we are given access to some views from the community, his doctors, his friends, and his family, in the pursuit of some restorative process and of raising awareness. It must also be pointed out that the discussion on the social and restorative process of verbatim theatre is not consensual. Alisa Solomon, for instance, sees *The Laramie Project* as possibly contributing to a categorization of the American cry for "victim rights" and "vengeance." (7). Inevitably, we must also consider how the information is filtered by what the members of the community decide to tell the theatre company.

The transcription of points of view of the population of Laramie into the text of the play gives visibility to the deep-rooted homophobia and the types of 'don't ask, don't tell' policies that are enforced across the U.S. and are more harmful than not. The character Marge Murray voices this attitude early on in the play:

Marge: As far as the gay issue, I don't give a damn one way or the other as long as they don't bother me. And even if they did, I'd just say no thank you. And that's the attitude of most of the Laramie population. They might poke one, if they were in a bar situation you know, they had been drinking, they might actually smack one in the mouth, but then they'd just walk away. Most of 'em said they would just say, "I don't swing that way," and whistle on about their business. Laramie is live and let live.
(Kaufman 30)

In Marge's view, the strangeness – the apparent *queerness* – of someone is a justifiable fact for them to be "poked" at a bar, or "smacked in the mouth", but if the whole of the aggression ends there, there is no harm done. In fact, in such conception there is no aggression at all. In a blatantly ironic reading, people in Laramie might punch a homosexual, that is fine, but murder is not something that would happen in such a peaceful, tolerant place. So, the idea that the murder that occurred in Laramie was perpetrated by two men that grew up in that town was something very hard for the population to come to terms with, especially due to the connection between the 'individual' attack and the collective atmosphere of the town – an unwillingness to see hate and intolerance as a mark of the land, and fear of being stigmatized as a community. To illustrate this, let us retrieve Imogen Tyler's insights on stigma as:

a figurative noun that means a 'distinguishing mark or characteristic (of a bad or objectionable kind)' and a 'mark of disgrace or infamy; a sign of severe censure or condemnation, regarded as impressed on a person or thing'. Everyday uses of the word 'stigma' draw on both these definitions; we employ 'stigma' to describe the degrading marks that are affixed to particular bodies, people, conditions and places within humiliating social interactions. (8)

After they cross the Wyoming border, members of the Tectonic Company remark that the Wyoming sign says: "WYOMING – LIKE NO PLACE ON EARTH", instead of "WYOMING – LIKE NO PLACE ELSE ON EARTH", which they find strange:

Barbara Pitts: We arrived in Laramie tonight. Just past the "Welcome to Laramie" sign – "Population 26,687" – the first thing to greet us was Walmart. In the dark, we could

be on any main drag in America – fast food chains, gas stations. But as we drove into the downtown area by the railroad tracks, the buildings still looked like a turn-of-the-century Western town. Oh, and as we passed the University Inn, on the sign where amenities such as heated pool or cable TV are usually touted, it said: HATE IS NOT A LARAMIE VALUE. (Kaufman 28)

There is clearly a rebranding effort from the town to distance itself from the hate crime that took place in Laramie and from the of places in rural America where such crimes could be expected to take place. Also importantly, hate is not a Christian value and as per Kaufman's text, Laramie has deeply rooted religious practices. As the Baptist Minister claims in his sermon, "the word is either sufficient or it is not" – meaning, people either live by their church's teachings or they are outsiders who do not abide by good and moral behaviour. According to the minister's wife: "He has very Biblical views about homosexuality" – he doesn't condone that kind of violence. But he doesn't condone that kind of lifestyle, you know what I mean? (Kaufman 37). Religious views are one example of the institutionally cultivated strategies that validate or punish certain acts. Jedediah Schultz also echoes the weight of strict Biblical views. Jedediah is a drama student at the University of Wyoming who obtained a scholarship at a Wyoming state high-school competition where he performed a scene from Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*.⁴ Kushner's play remains of the most influential drama pieces to evince the gay community's struggles in the U.S., particularly through its depiction of the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s and its national resonance with political and religious themes:

Jedediah Schultz: And when the time came I told my mom and dad so that they would come to the competition. Now you have to understand, my parents go to everything – every ballgame, every hockey game – everything I've ever done.

And they brought me into their room and told me that if I did that scene, that they would not come to see me in the competition. Because they believed that it is wrong – that homosexuality is wrong. They felt that strongly about it that they didn't want to come see their son do probably the most important thing he'd done to that point in his life. (Kaufman 26)

One important thing to be noted is that Jedediah is not a gay man himself. His choice to perform a scene from *Angels in America* relied solely on the quality of Kushner's work and his desire to win the competition. Even so, his parents' fear of being associated with or being supportive of anything close to homosexuality was too strong for them to support their son.

Religion is a common thread throughout the play. Laramie's people consider the town to be a good place because they abide by Christian values and that is a veneer applied over the town's social issues and intolerance. However, the blind abidance by the religious values is in itself a form of institutionalized violence that deepens marginalization and prejudice against those who are outside the Christian norm. As António Sousa Ribeiro claims, the same act of violence can have not only different consequences but also different meanings when applied to different contexts. Therefore, we need to understand violence as a process in which the physical dimension is only one portion of a broader and more diffuse framework (Sousa Ribeiro 8). Hence, the concept of violence must comprehend both the physical and the psychological dimension. These dimensions need to be understood along with the institutional, structural, and cultural forms that violence can take (Sousa Ribeiro 10). The town of Laramie, its population and the murder of Matthew Shepard evince how these forms of violence are seeped into American culture and values. The naturalized intolerance and homophobia that run across Laramie form a systematic violent structure that curtails the possibility of one individual or group to achieve their full potential and further perpetuates situations of inequality. As I previously stated, the attack on Matthew Shepard is an individualized act of violence but it is symbolic of deep-rooted homophobia and prejudice against the queer community.

Queer people 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 limits. Naturalizing the enforcement of religious values is a way to preserve inequality and helps

4 The complete title of the original play is *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*. The title engages with the idea of national issues seen and dealt with from the gay community's point of view, dwelling on how the national themes – religion, race, health, politics – shape the gay experience in the U.S.

blur the delimitation of intimate *versus* public concerns as it postulates that heterosexuality is the only acceptable possibility. In Sara Ahmed's words, "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 act in their intimate spheres. 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). As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, Matthew Shepard's murder represents an attack on a body that transgresses the norm. Providing an example of stigma as bodily imprints marked by relational power dynamics, I again borrow Tyler's formulation of stigma as "a form of power that is written on the body." (9) Consequently, in Kaufman's text, the way in which religious values are preached and put into practice in Laramie represent a form of cultural or symbolic violence, which is sustained by language and symbolic systems that aim at legitimizing specific forms of exercising power. In this case, the belief system is put into action and taken into account as if it is social consensus (Sousa Ribeiro 10). In *The Laramie Project*, we are left with a paradox. In some of the discourses of the townspeople that hope to distance Laramie from an aura of hate and intolerance based on religious values and love, it becomes visible that there is a disconnection between language and how the application of those values becomes a form of socially and structurally enforcing violence.

This prevention of fulfilling one's potential or living life to the fullest is seen in other queer characters in *The Laramie Project*, as is the case of Catherine Connolly, an 'out' lesbian professor at the university, and Jonas Slonaker, a gay man in his forties. These two characters give the audience their clear insight into this matter during the piece "Moment: Easier Said Than Done". Catherine Connolly recalls her interview at the university where she was asked what her husband did, so she came out then. Catherine goes on to tell a story about a phone call she received:

Catherine Connolly: She [the caller] said, "I hear – I hear – I hear you're gay. I hear you are." I was like, "Uh huh". And she said, "I hear you came as a couple. I'm one too. Not a couple, just a person." And so – she was – a kind of lesbian who knew I was coming and she wanted to come over and meet me immediately. And she later told me that there were other lesbians that she knew who wouldn't be seen with me. That I would irreparably taint them, that just to be seen with me could be a problem. (Kaufman 33)

Catherine is basically disclosing that the community of lesbians in Wyoming lives as a kind of secluded coven where it is safe for them to be who they are, but because Catherine was out, she would endanger that secluded group if she were to be seen with them. Once again, we can see the deep-rooted policy of 'don't ask, don't tell' that allowed people from that community to be queer if they are not open about it.

Jonas Slonaker shares the point of view of those who, in order to be themselves, had to get out:

Jonas Slonaker: When I came here I knew it was going to be hard as a gay man (...) But I kept telling myself, people should live where they want to live. And there would be times I would go down to Denver and I would go to gay bars and, um, people would as where I was from and I'd say "Laramie, Wyoming." And I met so many men down there from Wyoming. So many gay men who grew up here and they're like, this is not a place where I can live, how can you live there, I had to get out, grrr, grrr, grrr. But every once in a while there would be a guy, "Oh gosh, I miss Laramie." I mean, I really love it there, that's where I want to live. And they get this starry-eyed look and I'm like, if that's where you want to live, do it. I mean, imagine if more gay people stayed in small towns... But it's easier said than done, of course. (Kaufman 34)

It becomes clear that Laramie is not a friendly place for those who dare to step outside the norm, which we learn was the case for Matthew Shepard. Matthew was not particularly interested in hiding his sexual identity. His colleagues share how involved Matthew was with politics and

human rights issues. This openness allows for the spreading of rumors surrounding Matthew's supposed flamboyance. In fact, one argument used for the defense of the perpetrators was that when Matthew met his attackers, Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson, 21 and 19 years old respectively, at The Fireside bar, he was somehow teasing them and being provocative. However, this goes against the bartender Matt Galloway's interview, who is the "key eye-witness" (Kaufman 40):

Matt Galloway: They stated that Matt approached them, that he came onto them. I absolutely, positively disbelieve and refute the statement one hundred percent. Refute it. I'm gonna give you two reasons why.

One. Character reference. Why would he approach them? Why them? He wasn't approaching anybody else in the bar. They say he's gay, he was a flaming gay, he's gonna come on to people like that. Bullshit. He never came on to me. Hello?!? He came on to them? I don't believe it.

Two. Territorialism. Is – is – is the word I will use for this. And that's the fact that Matt was sitting there. Russell and Aaron were in the pool area. Upon their first interaction, they were in Matt's area, in the area that Matt had been seen all night. So who approached who by that? (Kaufman 40)

Character evidence – or character reference – is often a device that helps for further blaming victims and it also functions as a way to weaken claims of aggressive or criminal behavior of the offender. This is seen particularly in cases of sexual assault or abuse. According to the Legal Information Institute (LII), under the common law in the U.S., character evidence is generally inadmissible as: "it is said to weigh too much with the jury and to so over-persuade them as to prejudge one with a bad general record and deny him a fair opportunity to defend against a particular charge."⁵ (U.S. Supreme Court). Further, the Committee Notes to Federal Rule of Evidence 404 justify the rule, stating:

Character evidence is of slight probative value and may be very prejudicial. It tends to distract the trier of fact from the main question of what actually happened on the particular occasion. It subtly permits the trier of fact to reward the good man to punish the bad man because of their respective characters despite what the evidence in the case shows actually happened. (LII)

In *The Laramie Project*, the characters provide perspectives on both victim and offenders. Despite possible (mis)applications of common law, the representation of the social application of character evidence shows another form of evincing the violent structures that frame society. And, so, character evidence can be used to both blame Matthew's alleged flamboyant behavior, which disrupted the town's norm, and also to reduce the attack to an isolated event which no one saw coming from two good boys from Laramie. Aaron McKinney was reported by some as "a good kid" (Kaufman 41), liked by other people, and Russell was "just so sweet. He was the one who was the Eagle Scout (...) his whole presence was just quiet and sweet." (Kaufman 41). Hence, if the two boys who attacked Matthew Shepard and left him to die tied to a fence had done something completely out of character for both, then their behavior could be completely detached from the integrity of Laramie.

This brief juridical consideration may seem out of place, but all the arguments presented in the text of the play function almost as a dialogue with the audience. As actors speak the lines directly at them, the audience can hear multiple accounts of events that lead to the main moment. The description of Matthew Shepard's wounded body when he is found tied to a fence and the reactions to that finding are perhaps one of the moments of the play in which the traumatic events described are more evident – a twofold dynamic of the experience of trauma:

Stephen Johnson: That place [the fence] has become a pilgrimage site. Clearly that's a very powerful personal experience to go out there. It is so stark and empty and you can't help but think of Matthew there for eighteen hours in nearly freezing

5 U.S. Supreme Court, *Michelson v. United States*, 335 U.S. 469 (1948), *Michelson v. United States*. No. 23. Argued October 14–15, 1948. Decided December 20, 1948 – 335 U.S. 469 (<https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/335/469/>). Accessed on June 6th, 2022).

temperatures, with that view up there isolated, and, the “God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” comes to mind

(...)

Reggie Fluty: [H]e was covered in dry blood all over his head. There was dry blood underneath him and he was barely breathing... He was doing the best he could.

(...) [T]he only place that he did not have any blood on him, on his face, was what appeared to be where he had been crying down his face.

(...)

Dr. Cantway: I don't think, that any of us, can remember seeing a patient in that condition for a long time (...) Well, certainly you'd like to think that it's somebody from out of town, that comes through and beats somebody. I mean, things like this happen, you know, shit happens, and it happens in Laramie. But if there's been somebody who has been beaten repeatedly, ah, certainly this is something that offends us. I think that's a good word. It offends us! (Kaufman 43–45)

The descriptions of the vulnerable and injured body, along with the reflections on the impact that the moment of seeing him had on other people allows to argue that one goal of Kaufman's focus on trauma and stigma is to culminate in the creation of an affective atmosphere that connects the audiences to the described traumatic events. Here I draw on Theresa Brennan's consideration that “the emotions or affects of one person, and the enhancing or depressing energies these affects entail, can enter into another” (Brennan 3). Following 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, n.p.). Applied to drama studies, this transmission of affect – both between characters and between them and the audiences – reflects the ways in which artistic representations can affect the spectators. This is particularly true if we consider the intention of a restorative process behind the production of *The Laramie Project*, through the attempt of transforming what scholars like Caruth would deem ‘unspeakable trauma’ into language.

In conclusion, I believe that viewing *The Laramie Project* with these theoretical considerations in mind allows us to become attentive to the challenges that non-normativity poses on both individual and collective levels. The quest for visibility around issues of what are still considered ‘deviating sexualities’ means that many lives deal with moral wars around family politics, and body politics, as well as identity, religious, and sexual politics (Plummer 34). This consideration was made by sociologist Kenneth Plummer shortly after Kaufman wrote the play, and even though this has not ceased to be true to this day, I think that considering what has been exposed thus far – especially in terms of the socio-political questions surrounding the play – it was particularly accurate at the time. *The Laramie Project* can be considered a collective effort in reclaiming narratives of traumatized experiences of citizenship in the U.S., and an effort to shine a light on issues of intolerance and their connection to the nation-state, while examining the effects of institutionalized forms of violence. Through its narrative and dramatic strategies, *The Laramie Project* is a perfect example of how certain forms of writing evince the inherent conflict between public and private affects and reveal “how thoroughly institutionalized feeling rules tend to normalize certain forms of emotional expression while sanctioning others as inappropriate, perverse, abject, or immoral” (Emre 80). It allows us to reflect on invisible but deeply rooted structural and institutional norms that contribute to further stigmatization of groups positioned outside them.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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