



# “WE WILL BE CITIZENS”: AFFECT AND CITIZENSHIP IN REPRESENTATIONS OF THE AIDS CRISIS<sup>1</sup>

Leonardo Cascao

## ABSTRACT

This article analyzes affective representations of the 1980s HIV/AIDS epidemic in the United States taking Mike Nichols’s adaptation of Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* (2003) and Ryan Murphy’s adaptation of Larry Kramer’s *The Normal Heart* (2014) as case studies. Looking into affective representations in these works, I argue that throughout a period of government inaction towards an unknown and deadly virus, art was a means of engaging with and representing the activist and social movements of the time that further propelled the fight against AIDS and aimed at changing public perceptions. These portrayals of the epidemic pose questions of belonging and acceptance, which allows to explore and understand broader notions of citizenship, such as affective and intimate citizenship.

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

DOI: 10.37536/reden.2024.6.2486

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## 1. ADAPTATION AND THE VISUAL: THE (HE)ART OF MOVI(E)NG PEOPLE

This article analyzes representations of queer intimate relationships when faced by challenges imposed by HIV/AIDS, exploring how these relationships parallel queer attachments to the nation. It does so by looking at art as a means of engaging with social movements that further impelled the fight against AIDS and aimed at changing public perceptions. Despite not always having large circulation or means of production—such as the support of large studios, publishing houses or theater productions—different authors from the mid-1980s, such as Larry Kramer (*The Normal Heart*, 1985), William H. Hoffman (*As Is*, 1985), Harvey Fierstein (*Safe Sex*, 1987), into the 1990s, the case of Cheryl West (*Before It Hits Home*, 1991), Paula Vogel (*The Baltimore Waltz*, 1991), Paul Rudnick (*Jeffrey*, 1992), and Tony Kushner (*Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, 1993), turned to drama to reveal something deeper and more fractal about the scourge

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<sup>1</sup> This article was supported by the Luso-American Development Foundation (FLAD) and the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT: 2023.03317.BD).

of the epidemic on people's individual lives and relationships. Many affects and emotional charges are brought forward in these representations in a way that does not rely simply on sentimentality but that conveys the complexities of emotional and intimate experience.<sup>2</sup> When mentioning affects, I am adopting Theresa Brennan's notion that one person's affective charges, as well as the energies these entail, can permeate another (2004, 3).

As Michel Foucault makes clear in *The History of Sexuality*, 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 1978, 8). I follow the Foucauldian notion that attention to language and representations of intimacy can help extract political meanings from narratives. In turn, Nancy Armstrong argues that "the history of the novel cannot be understood apart from the history of sexuality" (1987, 9), meaning that written representations in domestic fiction allowed the modern individual to become an economic and psychological reality. Hence, the written representations of intimacy and desire made way for a conceptualization of identity that relied on more than predetermined novelistic conventions. This study aims at exploring if and how these concepts can be applied to other social groups and narrative forms through the reading of affects at play. There are two main visual narratives upon which this article 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 television film based on the play by Larry Kramer (1985). These works stand as ideal case studies given that both focus on queer relationships set against the backdrop of the AIDS epidemic, rendering visible the hindrance of queer attachments to the US, and conveying very strong affective and intimate representations which engage important questions in US culture, such as, the visibility of queer relationships and whether these are considered valid; the value of queer lives and the association of illness with what were perceived as 'deviant' lifestyles; who has the right to adequate healthcare and what is worthy of investment in research, and why; and, ultimately, who are first-rate and second-rate citizens?

Both teleplays for *Angels in America* and *The Normal Heart* were adapted by the original authors, and both are critically acclaimed, award-winning works.<sup>3</sup> This, along with their presence in television accounts for their popularity among viewers. Also,

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<sup>2</sup> In this article the use of the term intimacy is not meant to be exclusively synonymous with sexual intimacy, but encompassing of different kinds of personal relations, such as the case of caregivers, family, and friends, allowing space to elaborate on a broader context that expands the concept of citizenship from a legal-based perspective.

<sup>3</sup> *Angels in America*, which 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 additional wins in other categories, in 2004. *The Normal Heart* won the Tony Award for Best Revival of a Play in 2011 and went on to win the Emmy Award for Outstanding Television Film in 2014.

through adaptation to television, Kushner's and Kramer's plays can reach larger audiences, even nowadays, due to technological advancements and remote access to content on streaming platforms.

Another reason 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, and therefore television, when theorizing affect. Recently, Darragh Greene and Graham Price have elaborated on emotion in film, discussing the affective turn in American cinema. According to these authors: "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 (Graham and Greene 2020, 2). This echoes Virginia Woolf's early considerations of the medium, regarding how "cinema has within its grasp innumerable symbols for emotions that have so far failed to find expression" in other mediums (Woolf 1926, 309).

Practically 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 theater (or at home), but when watching a film or television series the whole action is equidistant to the viewer, much more than it would be when watching a play. According to Lynne Joyrich: "TV has had an intensely political history; as a domestic medium, located in the home, it has long provoked concerns about its influence on politics, social dynamics, and cultural values as well as its impact on the more minute politics of everyday life, personal relations, and intimate relationships" (Joyrich 2013, 133). Hence, the study of adaptation for television 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 *merge into* instead of just *looking 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, known as Kaposi Sarcoma (KS), which were one of the first visual markers of the illness.

A particular case for the importance of film for affective visualization is the nuance of emotion that the actors can bring to the characters, which, in performative terms, is generally more subdued. 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 theater 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" (McKellen 1981, n.p.). In other words, there can be greater intimacy in the engagement with the viewer through filmic narratives, which is important for this analysis. As Linda Hutcheon (2006) argues, the different media and genres that stories are trans-coded to and from in the adapting process are not just formal entities as they 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 (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 community under the very complex circumstances of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Rosemary Hennessy (1995, 31) warns against the risks of queer visibility in commodity culture (“a process that invariably depends on the lives and labor of invisible others”), whilst pointing out important positive effects, in which “[c]ultural visibility can prepare the ground for gay civil rights protection; affirmative images of lesbians and gays in the mainstream media (...) can be empowering for those of us who have lived our lives with no validation at all from the dominant culture” (Hennessy 1995, 31). Hence, looking at queer narratives as forms of queer representation attempts to disrupt heteronormative hegemonic representations.

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” (2015, 103). This perspective complements Susan Sontag’s considerations on the potential of art to be “an instrument for modifying consciousness and organizing new modes of sensibility” (2018, 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’; in this case, ‘the Other’ as someone defined in opposition to what is the perceived norm, i.e., the non-heterosexual, the queer, or even the non-healthy. Affective visualization of these works can foster an affective atmosphere between different groups.

## 2. AFFECTIVE AFFORDANCES: LOOKING FOR RELATIONAL POTENTIALITIES

Although one of the main focuses of these narratives is centered around affective relationships, their dealing with the notions of identity and social politics makes way for these concepts to be explored regarding their influence on the experience of citizenship. Affect is not merely a descriptive narrative tool; affects are political and, as 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. (2015, 107)

Hence, I will examine how both narratives depict the gay community’s struggle in the US, and how the characters’ experience of citizenship is affected by their ‘intimate

troubles' and hindered by their affective (dis)connection to the nation-state. Through their narrative strategies and attention to language, strengthened by their visual component, these works raise consciousness to issues that the gay community continuously faces and that are here exposed at a fractural period in the fight for gay rights. Nowadays, in Western societies HIV is no longer equivalent to a death sentence, but there is still a stigma—often associated with moral connotations—surrounding it. Consequently, the representation of these experiences in media and culture is important to prevent cultural amnesia surrounding HIV/AIDS that furthers stigmatization. According to Jeffrey Escoffier: “[t]he epidemic provoked a devastating crisis—one that was political, cultural, and sexual. For homosexual men, AIDS was a historical trauma that shattered the experience of sexual freedom and disrupted new patterns of identity and community” (2011, 129).

Undoubtedly, visual works like *Angels* and *The Normal Heart* are in themselves activist pieces of art. As a site of activism, the engagement of these narratives with the cultural imaginary of the US results in a continuous production of social meanings that does not allow the fight for equality to subside and allows for the extension of the notion of citizenship—hence my considerations on affective and intimate citizenship as well.

As Gregg and Seigworth (2011) have said, there is not a “single, generalizable theory of affect” (3), something that can be pointed as a shortcoming but that represents a prospect for discussion and development in research and critical thinking. Gregg and Seigworth’s works on affect follow the reflections on affective phenomena as originally elaborated by Baruch Spinoza in 1667, and its later interpretation by Gilles Deleuze in 1968, who placed the generation of affect in the relations between bodies and worlds. The relational aspects of affect were essential to the use of affect studies by feminist, and subsequently queer readings of the theory. Scholars such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Lauren Berlant, Sara Ahmed, and Deborah B. Gould, among others, have reclaimed the body to center-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.

Spinoza stated that “[n]o one has yet determined what the body can do” (qtd. in Gregg and Seigworth 2011, 3), hinting at the potential of the body as quite an unknown field from which many theories could arise. According to Gregg and Seigworth:

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)

Hence, affects at play are always bouncing off one another’s bodies; one *affects* and in turn *is affected*. 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 (2012, 86-87). The selected works portray the gay community as a collectivization of individual bodies with shared identity aspects, under a specific set of circumstances. This collective body comes together in facing the deadly and unknown disease, forming an affective community as it encounters allied forces. These works appeal to the audience through the representation of sensitive topics that merge marginality and basic civil rights, tangled in the weaving of human relationships. It is important to explore the intricacy between the representations of these relations and the meanings from the shared experience of watching these films.

The affective visualization of the works enables the comprehension of the cultural processes behind the representation of the social connections on screen. Depictions of gay experiences are inevitably representations of expressions of intimacy within the community, and the freedom of the community to fulfil intimate desires against the social *status quo*—that of heteronormative 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 that may or may not encompass the recognition and validation of queer relationships, queer affects, and, ultimately, even the value of queer lives (Cascao 2023, 7). The boundary separating the intimate from the public realm becomes unclear. It is necessary to consider the importance of alternative narratives to the norm as means of resistance against heteronormativity as the only valid affective form, so that alternative modes of living and loving cease to be seen as a threat to the social order. Works like *Angels* and *The Normal Heart* aim to be counternarratives that expose the value of alternative modes of life, whilst denouncing the social and political work that needs to be done to minimize discrimination and effect normalization. The focus on the affective charges of the visual narratives 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 make space for the normalization of different forms of relationships and expressions of intimacy. Therefore, interpreting these narratives invested in affective and emotional visualization allows one to become attentive to the spectrum of affects displayed in these dynamics, and hence fulfil the potential for the cultivation of collective affective 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” (2012, 88). These new infrastructures help make sense of new experiences and social relations, developing in a particular context. Along with the representations of intimacy, other affects are common to the two works, such as grief, shame, and, of course, love in its different manifestations.

### 3. CAN THERE BE ANGELS IN AMERICA? AFFECTIVE REPRESENTATIONS IN QUEER STORIES

Film is an emotional medium of storytelling, as stated in the first section of this article. In the selected works, the interactions and emotional representation between the characters aim at giving visibility to a disenfranchised community in the wake of an unknown and fatal illness. The affective turn 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 can help the viewer see beyond the aesthetic components of the work. 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.

Consider the opening of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*. The story begins in October 1985 and revolves around an ensemble of characters that are all connected in some way or another. If experiencing intimacy amid living with HIV/AIDS is one of the main themes of the plot, the entanglement of that struggle with the individuals' confrontation with social, religious, and political issues reveals the blurring lines between what may be deemed a private or a public concern.

The series opens with the funeral of Sarah Ironson, an American Jewish. As the Rabbi speaks, his words create a collective atmosphere in a sermon that links Sarah's personal history with that of her community, dissipating 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 of 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)

From the Rabbi's eulogy, the quest of belonging, and what that means in the US, stands out and starts the narrative. Gradually, it will become clear that the great voyage for the characters in *Angels* will not be one of a geographical kind but the great voyage for acceptance, for the feeling of belonging and coming to terms with oneself and with others. 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 gay experiences. The opening scene sets the tone for this continuum of the national *versus* the personal and starts to dilute the boundaries between the

public and the private. In the Rabbi's speech about the journey of the ancestors that still lives within people to this day, we can draw a parallel with the quest for belonging, for citizenship, that queer people aim at in US society, just as their ancestors sought full belonging and citizenship. Albeit the circumstances and the protagonists of the journey have changed, the aspiration to belong remains, not necessarily through assimilation but to feel and be regarded as a first-rate citizen. Hence, the America portrayed is no longer a destination but rather where the voyage constantly takes place, in each of its citizens.

The subsequent representations on *Angels* bring 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 Pitt, a Mormon man married to a woman, Harper, being ridiculed by his mother, Hannah, a very strict Mormon, when he comes out to her.<sup>4</sup> We witness Harper's realization of the lies that her marriage to Joe is built upon and face the fact that her emotional problems are exacerbated by the insecurity in her marriage and the lack of intimacy and affection. We witness a bedridden but raging Prior, visibly scarred from AIDS with noticeable skin lesions in his face, being left by his lover, Louis, whose fear of the physical aspects of this illness is too overwhelming 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 the epidemic, and often, with queer relationships. In these scenarios, the audience is affected by the relational dynamics on screen, and through the fostering of affective recognition they take part almost as a third element in the visualization of the scenes.

The Pitts' intimate problems show that those who follow the rule of enforced heterosexuality in the US 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 the nation's idealization of family values. Joe is adamant in not admitting such failure. When Harper confronts 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

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<sup>4</sup> Twenty years after the theater premiere 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 March 11, 2024). 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 March 11, 2024)



nothing left, I'm a shell. There's nothing left to kill (...) 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)

Thinking in parallel of an infection like HIV/AIDS, Joe tries to find a cure for his condition by killing a hidden part of himself, his true sexuality, restrained by the imposed heteronormativity at both socio-political and religious levels. 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 then is 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.

In the opening scene, Kushner connected one individual casualty with a collective experience. Similarly, *The Normal Heart* gives visibility to the collective casualties caused by HIV/AIDS, not only through the historical allusions to the increasing numbers of deaths as the years passed 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 Ahmed (2014) explains:

Queer histories tell us of inescapable injustices, for example, when gay or lesbian mourners are not recognized 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. (155)

This melancholic identification that Ahmed refers to is where the affective appeal to larger audiences works, alerting to the need for normalizing queer relationships whose lack of equal rights is a constant throughout life. For "the failure to recognize queer loss *as* loss is also a failure to recognize queer relationships as significant bonds, or that queer lives are lives worth living" (Ahmed 2014, 156.) This argument pairs Grossberg's claim that "different groups have available to them different possibilities for how they might be located within and occupy such affective modes of living" (2015, 109).

In *The Normal Heart*, we see doctors refuse to examine patients and declare a cause of death. We see patients put into garbage bags, dumped in the alley like trash. We see dehumanization of death as casualties are not recognized by the authorities, nor are they

provided with a dignified funeral. Echoing Ahmed’s words, it is as if the lives represented on screen are devoid of meaning or value—closer to be considered disposable lives.

#### 4. “CARDBOARD TOMBSTONES BOUND TOGETHER WITH A RUBBER BAND”: SHARED GRIEF, COMMUNITY AND CITIZENSHIP

A particularly successful visuality of grief and the claim of visibility to HIV/AIDS victims in *The Normal Heart* comes through the character of Tommy Boatwright and his collection of Rolodex cards at a friend’s funeral:

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 in Tommy’s desk drawer, multiplied into smaller groups of Rolodex cards, each with a name and other personal details, representing another life lost. This visual strategy intends to have impact by naming victims and showing on screen how the ravage of the virus quickly decimated so many lives. It conveys that if a Rolodex card with someone’s personal details would not be thrown into a trashcan, much less should a human body be disposed in an alley. The film ends with shots of bound up Rolodex cards piling up in Tommy’s desk drawer. 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 affective prodding on the viewer.

But how does the process of affective visualization engage with the notions of affective and intimate citizenship? First, it is important to establish some distinctions. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, for example, 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.

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)

Both works deal with questions of identity—individual and collective –, social and emotional belonging, and relations of race, gender, class, and sexuality by addressing intimate issues in a political and public way. As mentioned, affective visualization makes

way for an emotional connection between the viewer and the object, with the viewer sometimes *merging into* as opposed to *looking at* the characters on screen. These works can foster processes of identification and thus create a sense of belonging, which engages with the notions of affective and intimate citizenship. Indeed, these concepts of citizenship gain relevance with these films, as we can explore how national and political issues impact on intimate aspects of people's lives, and how they affect people's participation in the political sphere. Alongside the issues of discrimination towards the queer community and the health crisis caused by the epidemic, the works deal with political action in the US during that period, and with the representation of fictionalized versions of real people and real activist organizations that gained power from collective mobilization.

Regarding collectivization, it is important to consider narrative imagination and storytelling as affective collectivization occurs not just through identification with but also through affective recognition of 'the Other.' Martha Nussbaum argues that some moral and social concerns benefit from being expressed in the form of a story: "[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 connection towards another becomes activated by affective resonance and processes of identification. In turn, to be able to experience full citizenship, one must be accepted by society and have the right to be seen and represented, too. Here, we can establish a link with Judith Butler's thoughts on resistance as emerging from the vulnerability of being seen: "we are first vulnerable and then overcome that vulnerability, at least provisionally, through acts of resistance" (Butler 2016, 12). These television works then provide a representation of what happens when the citizens' basic needs are not met: they are left without support as the infrastructure on which people depend on is, in fact, not there for them (Butler 2016, 13). The feeling of belonging is strengthened by gaining access to more platforms of representation that can engage processes of identification and affective ties to those who relate to or connect with those representations.

Affective visualization can thus generate an emotional connection between the viewer and the art object and this emotional connection, shared by multiple viewers, allows for the creation of an affective community that shares an affective attachment to the same cultural objects. 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" (2019, 289). Affective communities are based on 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. We can then see an affective

component in the conventional understanding of citizenship as a rights-based political membership of the individual with the state. Thus, it may become easier to understand how affect and emotion are employed as mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion, as these categories can reinforce difference and differential treatment. Due to differences in religion, race, sex, gender, or class one individual may be perceived as a “quasi” or “technical” citizen whose belonging to the political community remains in question despite legal citizenship (Ayata 2019, 330). When that occurs, additional affective and emotional efforts must be performed to confirm rightful belonging. Hence, bearing in mind the concept of affective citizenship is helpful to understand what is necessary beyond legal concerns in order to partake in the full experience of citizenship. 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.

The concept of intimate citizenship is useful in alerting 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 must 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, not implying one model, one pattern or one way (Plummer 2003, 13).

The autobiographical aspect of Larry Kramer’s work allows for his engagement with AIDS activism and social movements to transpire and renders visible some of the work behind the social collectivization in the fight against the virus and in trying to provoke a governmental response. Through his alter-ego, Ned Weeks, we can see the struggle to fully fit in with his companions throughout the entire film, even when he funds Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC)<sup>5</sup> to reach out to people and political representatives, looking for research funding. Kramer’s art is part of his activist work, which, following Engin Isin’s theory, can be regarded as an act of citizenship: an active rather than passive form of participation that break with “social-historical patterns” (Isin 2008, 2). According to Isin: “[i]f people invest themselves in claiming rights, we are told, they are producing not only new ways of being subjects with rights but also new ways of becoming subjects with responsibilities, since claiming rights certainly involves ‘responsibilizing’ selves” (2008, 1). Ned’s outspokenness is not well-accepted by his friends, as his views are often considered to be another attack on the queer community; something that echoes Kramer’s own

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<sup>5</sup> 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>). Kramer was also a founder of the group ACT UP, in 1987, committed to end the AIDS crisis (<https://actupny.org>).

backlash. As Kushner explains in his introduction<sup>6</sup> 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, Kushner’s interpretation is 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 2011, xxii).

Much like Kramer, Ned wants the gay community to fight, engage politically, and to take sexual precaution and responsibility. To Ned, it is evident 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). Although gay and lesbian movements originated with the sexual revolution, the public sphere debate over sex was not mainly concerned with non-heterosexual identities.

While writing provocative articles that urge gay men to come out, fight back prejudice and claim space in the public sphere, thereby claiming responsibility upon the community, Ned keeps meeting obstacles in this struggle, something that the meetings at the GMHC make evident. When preparing invitations 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, but the group believes that the envelopes should contain just the initials of the association, as the word ‘gay’ will jeopardize the cause and even harm the reputation of the men receiving those envelopes in the mail. Still, the event is successful and the GMHC raises more money than any other gay group ever in New York. This event, showing the involvement of the gay community in the fight against AIDS, takes the form of a dance where men can dance together in a safe space. As Ned dances with his partner 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 could respond to the epidemic in only two ways: by raising money for scientific research and service

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<sup>6</sup> 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 US Supreme Court struck down the Defense of Marriage Act, a major step on the way to marriage equality. (<https://behindthescenes.nyhistory.org/history-home-larry-kramer-tony-kushner-normal-heart/>—Accessed March 12, 2024)

organizations or by creating works that express human suffering and loss (1987, 3). With *The Normal Heart*, Kramer responded in both ways, and his characters depict 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” (1987, 4), and Kramer’s art and activism have indeed endured and materialized as part of the Gay Rights Movement to this day.<sup>7</sup>

Kramer’s writing reveals struggles within the community in the attempt to balance the fight against AIDS with holding the ground that the Gay Rights Movement had gained thus far. As incremental pieces of evidence pointed to sexual transmission, the prescription for the gays to “cool it off” and 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 were the ones to blame for the virus, again enforcing 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 Mayor Koch’s office after denying support to the GMHC:

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 could initially be seen as resistance for the sake of sexual freedom alone is later made explicit as resistance and refusal to hide and assume a guilt they did not have, since they had fought for equality for so long.

During this breakdown, Mickey says: “I used to love my country” (01:26:19). I will begin to conclude this article by drawing a parallel between this and another scene from *Angels*. In the latter, a character named Belize, who is an African American nurse, former drag queen and Prior’s best friend, talks to Louis about his thoughts on the US, shaped by his experience:

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<sup>7</sup> 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 Shepard, 21-year-old student who was brutally attacked in Wyoming and died. Protesters from the Westboro Baptist Church, incited by pastor Fred Phelps, picketed Shepard’s bearing signs with homophobic slogans. Allies dressed as angels to block the protesters. (<https://www.matthewshepard.org>— Accessed on July 2, 2024) 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 July 2, 2024).

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)

This interaction comes off short in a miniseries that spans over six hours, but from it we can infer on the different levels of affective attachment to the state that derives from different levels of privilege even within the gay community, such as differences that arise from being a white cisgender man or a black man, as well as a healthy or sick person, in which those less privileged are often further alienated. These differences align with Suzanna Danuta Walters's views on how multiple markers of difference shape people's identities in profound ways. In Walter's 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 US society" (Walters 2006, 146). The 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 US are shown to come from their hindered experiences of citizenship.

Still, it is fundamental to point out that the marginalized experiences that are portrayed in both works still account only for the relationships of white, cisgender, homosexual men. In their claim for attention, these accounts exclude the representation of Black and Latinx people with AIDS, as well women and trans women with AIDS.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, in these works, women are crystalized as beings that are free of disease; even the titular Angel of Kushner's work, albeit nonhuman, is played by a woman.

Despite the works' shortcomings, both Kushner and Kramer aimed at calling attention to the community's problems, and affective attention can help foster connections and involve partial citizens in a more concrete feeling of belonging and a more fulfilling experience of citizenship. 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" (Plummer 2003, 56)—the process of attributing rights but also responsibilities. In the closing remarks from *Angels*, Prior breaks the fourth wall and addresses the audience directly, looking into the camera and saying: "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,

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<sup>8</sup> 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](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3397562)—Accessed July 2, 2024.

Ep. 6, 01:07:18). The monologue is addressed directly at the audience, creating a dialogic relation and aiming at a direct connection. At a time of extreme crisis, when governmental and institutional action were faltering, through the creation of these narratives, these authors and artists were able to find a form of making a stance on the value and visibility of queer lives.

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