

“How dearly would they enjoy being sad about him”:

Queer (un)happiness in contemporary culture

Julien Gagnon

Department of English

McGill University, Montreal

August 2023

A thesis submitted to McGill University in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree
of the Master of Arts Program in English

© Julien Gagnon 2023



Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	5
Narrative and the Prospect for Changing how we Inhabit the World	5
The Phenomenon: A Case Study	10
ON THEORY: AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF (UN)HAPPINESS	15
Theoretical Background	19
Digging Up the Happiness	23
1: THE WORLD THAT READS QUEERS AS UNHAPPY	26
On Gay Villains	26
Queer Love is Doomed	29
2: THE FETISHIZATION OF QUEER UNHAPPINESS	39
The Disavowal of Queer Loss	39
The Quintessential Gay Tragedy	46
3: NORMATIVE QUEER HAPPINESS	61
A Narrative of Assimilation	61
Happy Endings	70
CONCLUSION	75
BIBLIOGRAPHY	80

Abstract English

This thesis traces the dominant economies of (un)happiness within mainstream queer narratives in contemporary culture. Three particular narrative types are identified as particularly prevalent and impactful on how queer people are conceived of: queer lives doomed to be unhappy, queer unhappiness that is fetishized, and normative queer happiness attained via assimilation. Particular cultural examples of each trope are identified and closely read in order to reveal the ways in which these depictions moralize those who are unhappy as “bad people” deserving of their unhappiness, and in turn, moralize happy people as “good people”. In the final analysis, both portrayals of queer people as unhappy and portrayals of queer people as normatively happy effectively legitimize and reify the dominant heteronormative social forms that are already attributed as happiness-causes.

Abstract French

Cette thèse trace les économies dominantes du malheur/bonheur au sein des histoires queers populaires de la culture contemporaine. Trois types d'histoires particuliers sont identifiés comme étant particulièrement prédominants et ayant un impact sur la façon dont les gens pensent aux personnes queers : les vies queers condamnées au malheur, la tristesse queer fétichisée et le bonheur queer normatif atteint par assimilation. Des exemples culturels particuliers de chaque trope sont identifiés et examinés de près afin de révéler les manières dont ces représentations moralisent les personnes malheureuses en les considérant comme des "mauvaises personnes" méritant leur malheur, et en retour, moralisent les personnes heureuses en les considérant comme des "bonnes personnes". Dans l'analyse finale, tant les représentations des personnes queers comme malheureuses que celles des personnes queers ayant un bonheur normatif légitime et réifient les formes sociales hétéronormatives dominantes qui sont déjà considérées comme des causes du bonheur.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisor Richard Jean So for his support and for giving me the freedom to write about what really matters to me, as well as Alexander Manshel and Sarah Stunden for their guidance. I would also like to thank my partner Jose Gallego, whose love and support made this thesis possible, despite all the challenges of COVID and completing (albeit two very different) graduate degrees together. My story of happiness always begins with you.

“You cannot get in the way of anyone’s path to happiness, it also does no good. The problem is figuring out which part is the path and which part is the happiness.”

Richard Siken

"Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true."

Donna Haraway

“And the sad act like lepers
They stick to the shadows
They long to ring bells of warning
To tell of their coming
So that the pure can shut their doors”

Conor Oberst, *Ariette*

INTRODUCTION

Narrative and the Prospect for Changing how we Inhabit the World

This thesis is an effort to unearth the dominant economies of (un)happiness within queer narratives in contemporary culture. By economy, I mean the interface between those who are happy and those who are not. The (un) in front of “happiness” indicates how unhappiness, and “the unhappy” in particular, operate as an afterthought; Sara Ahmed has argued that unhappiness has remained “unthought,” defined simply “by the lack of happiness, as the absence of its presence” (17)¹. This structure of thinking (or not thinking) about happiness, in effect, conceals much of “the unhappiness of the history of happiness” (17). To put it simply, these structures of feeling exist in a dialectical relationship; most often, heterosexuals are unsurprisingly the “happy”, and their opposite, queer people, are the “unhappy”. In spite of how straightforward this relationship might seem, the interface or economy between the two is worth examining further; by attributing unhappiness to queer people and happiness only to heterosexuals, heterosexuality is shaped and legitimized as the exclusive avenue to happiness. In other words, “it is not that queers feel sad or wretched right from the beginning,” but rather that it is “because the world is unhappy with queer love that queers become unhappy” (Ahmed 98). Heterosexual happiness, most often associated with dominant heterosexual institutions, such as marriage, the couple form, and the family unit, is often seen as antithetical to queer happiness, which is considered as a threat to those institutions. Depicting queer people as unhappy becomes a means to protect the institutions which are seen as the long-standing “sources” of hegemonic (heterosexual) happiness.

¹ All subsequent quotations from Sara Ahmed that do not include the title of the work in the citation are from *The Promise of Happiness*.

While queer happiness is not at all prohibited in contemporary culture (although its depiction in mainstream media has been almost exclusively limited to the last decade or two), the most depicted form of queer happiness has been incredibly normalized. In most cases, depictions of queer happiness invariably serve the same function that their opposite, queer unhappiness, once served; the normalization or gentrification of queer happiness means that “queers are rewarded with happiness in return for approximating signs of straightness” (Ahmed 115). In so doing, heterosexual institutions and behaviors are once again legitimized as the exclusive avenues to happiness. Thus, contemporary depictions of normative queer happiness often fail to satisfy many non-heterosexual audiences, as being a happy queer becomes entirely about “being like” those who oppress you.

Normative queer happiness is easy to identify; often, it simply resembles the traditional heterosexist form of happiness, only with queerness latched on like some lame afterthought. As Ahmed puts it, it is simply a form of “approximating” (115) heterosexuality, and most importantly, approximating privilege; two white gay men, married, with an (adopted/surrogate) child, high paying jobs, a large house in a wealthy neighborhood, ... Importantly, I am not arguing that such depictions of normative queer happiness cannot or should not be appreciated—knowing that such “happy” lifestyles are even a possibility goes a long way in troubling the conspicuous and harmful association of queerness with unhappiness. Rather, my view is that one must remain critical of normative queer happiness, rather than celebrate it too hastily, in order to resist further reifying a normative (heterosexual) lifestyle as the only pathway to happiness at the cost of the plurality of queer happiness that may take its place (or, at least, take place alongside it). In other words, the argument goes: by modelling itself after normative conventions, this form

of normative queer happiness serves only to reaffirm and thereby solidify heterosexism as the preeminent site of sociopolitical privilege.

While inhabiting sites of privilege through “passing” was once a strategy of survival for queer people, and white gay men in particular (due to the ease with which they could integrate themselves into other privileged groups), today, habituating oneself to heterosexist norms is less about “surviving,” and more about “thriving” at the cost of the survival of other less privileged queer individuals. As a result, we must question the moral implications of embracing normativity in the name of happiness, rather than in the name of survival; are gay men in particular implicating themselves “in the very relations of power [they seek] to oppose” in their normative attempts to be happy? (Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 83) And, in turn, must we thereby trouble the association of gayness with political responsibility and social justice, if these individuals give in to assimilation so easily?

In attempting to answer these questions, I first turn to the catalyst from which normative queer happiness is produced, which Jack Parlett, in his study of anti-queer violence in contemporary cinema, summarizes as: “the world demands that gay life be ultimately sad” (6). In the first two chapters of this thesis, we closely examine this age-old trope of the unhappy queer, which one finds not only still alive in contemporary culture, but thriving. In other words, while normative happiness is a repeatedly observable phenomenon in contemporary mainstream depictions of queer lifestyles, its cultural catalyst, the demand for queer life to be sad, still exists alongside it. I call this demand for queer unhappiness a catalyst because much of the celebration of these depictions of gentrified happiness that approximates hegemonic signs of privilege comes out of a starvation for representation of non-heterosexual happiness of any kind—a case of “beggars can't be choosers”.

At times, it seems almost impossible for queer characters to escape unhappiness. Such depictions are important, as I maintain that the stories we tell about ourselves play an important social function in legitimizing and moralizing some lifestyles at the cost of others. As two leading scholars of queer theory put it, there are profound “interrelations among sex, *narrative*, and the prospect for changing how we inhabit and relate to the world” (Berlant and Edelman xvi; emphasis added). I stress the word “narrative,” as this thesis will focus on the analysis of mainstream cultural depictions, or, the narratives we tell about ourselves and others. If we are to change how queer people can “inhabit and relate to the world,” we have to start with how we are depicted—or, the possibilities which exist in our minds for how we can exist in the world, which often find their source in cultural representations. To explain what I mean here, I invoke Ahmed’s concept of queer phenomenology, which she defines as the way in which “bodies take shape through tending towards objects that are reachable” (“Orientations” 543); queer lifepaths take shape by tending towards other visible representations of queer lived experience. We can only do what we think is possible, and often “possibility” comes from what examples are available to you culturally. At the same time, the possibilities which heterosexuals imagine for queer people are influenced by cultural representations in the same way. This is important because these heterosexual people might be the parents of queer people, their closest friends, or their teachers, all of whom might have a profound effect on the life choices the queer person will tend towards because they are “reachable”.

In this manner, my work builds on Sara Ahmed’s insight, elaborated in *The Promise of Happiness*, that “the unhappy queer is made unhappy by the world that reads queers as unhappy” (43): Ahmed names “anticipatory causality” the process by which something “happy” or “sad” is made morally “good” or “bad” (40). As she summarizes it: “to be happy about something makes

something [morally] good” (29). In effect, normative queer happiness and its catalyst, the omnipresent trope of queer unhappiness, both serve this heterosexist anticipatory causality; heterosexuality is “made” morally good at the cost of queerness, both by being contrasted with the unhappy queer lifestyle, and by being depicted as that which queers must approximate if they do seek to become (normatively) happy.

As a young queer person exposed to contemporary depictions of other queer people, one is often given a simple choice: be unhappy in your own way, or be “happy” by giving in to normativity and embrace being politically sterile, and as a result, reinforcing privileged pathways to happiness—and in the process, rendering them easier choices for other queers to follow. After situating this work within current queer theory, this thesis will begin with two chapters on the trope of “the world demands that gay life be ultimately sad”. These chapters will interrogate contemporary cultural artefacts to understand how unhappy depictions of queer lifestyles are still thriving today and their potential effects on mainstream and queer audiences alike. Afterwards, in chapter three, we turn to mainstream representations of normative queer happiness as both a critical reaction to, and, perhaps inevitably, a reinforcement of, queer unhappiness.

When it comes to the scope of this thesis, I broadly employ the word “contemporary” to refer to the period after World War II. That being said, almost all of the artifacts of contemporary culture interrogated in this work are much more “contemporary” than that—being published in the last decade or two, and more specifically in the years immediately preceding and following the legal recognition of same-sex marriage in the United States. The various periodizations of queer culture, while not of immediate focus in this thesis, are nevertheless fundamental to the evolution of how “happiness” could be conceived for queer people, and thereby must be delineated at the outset. Only one contemporary depiction of queerness introduced in this thesis

dates back to before the Stonewall riots and the growth of the gay liberation movement: Christopher Isherwood's 1964 novel *A Single Man*. Evidently, the way the protagonist George can conceive of happiness in that narrative is very different from the way individuals imagined happiness during the HIV/AIDS crisis, or in the last decade or two since same-sex marriage become gradually legalized worldwide. These various "periods" of queer history, each surfacing different lifeworlds of queer (un)happiness, are all represented in this thesis, in an attempt to give a general overview of the evolution of queer (un)happiness over time.

The Phenomenon: A Case Study

One recent depiction of a relatively "happy" resolution to a gay subplot, where one might once have expected a tragic ending, HBO's *House of the Dragon* (2022), features a gay prince escaping a royal court in order to live with his lover in exile. Upon further examination, however, the path that Laenor Velaryon must take to become happy is not as much of a positive representation of queerness as it might seem. Laenor's happiness is secured at the cost of the life of his lover, who is brutally murdered earlier in the series (significantly, the earliest and certainly the most gruesome act of violence in the entire show). Whether it was intended or not, by associating queerness with such gruesome violence, *House of the Dragon* is "reading" queerness as violent and unhappy, and by extension, it cannot be "made morally good"—to borrow Ahmed's terminology.

Upon first encountering the television series, armed with certain expectations for graphic violence after having watched its sequel *Game of Thrones*, released over a decade earlier, *House of the Dragon* oddly lacks such violence—that is, until the scene where Joffrey Lonmouth is

beaten to death, his head crushed in, as his lover Laenor fights to get to him and protect him.²

While the association between the murder of Joffrey and his homosexuality is not straightforward, the sheer violence of the scene and the images of Laenor thrown to the ground, fighting to get to his dead lover's gory corpse, and subsequently crying over it, have a powerful effect. While Joffrey is perhaps not killed for being gay, gayness (and a particularly painful, mournful gayness) saturates his violent death. In effect, no matter the reason for Joffrey's death, the scene cannot help but cite many other *real* gay men who were brutally beaten to death for being gay.

In such a light, Laenor's eventual "happy ending" later in the series must be examined very critically, particularly if such an ending is meant to add some diversity to the show, in an attempt to pander to queer audiences. Laenor escapes the court where he cannot be openly gay by faking his death to his family—two gay characters, then, must "die" in this narrative before any gay character can even conceive of being happy—first Laenor's lover, then Laenor himself. Laenor's happiness comes at the cost of his *self*; Laenor must die, leaving behind only an undistinguishable charred corpse for his family and friends, in order to truly be himself. Most notably, his second lover (this is several years later) Ser Qarl Correy is the one that is to be blamed for having "killed" him, further reading queerness as violent, and thereby both unhappy and immoral. Significantly, this "murder" constitutes intra-gay violence, portrayed as a form of self-harm; in effect, by making Ser Qarl responsible for his lover's "death," the show blames homosexuals for their violent unhappy fates, attributing this violence towards one another to a

² It is notable that one of the most gory and gruesome scenes in *Game of Thrones* is also reserved for a queer character, Oberyn Martell. In fact, both Joffrey Lonmouth and Oberyn are killed by brutally having their faces beaten in and skulls crushed. Both shows seem to be making a claim about gay vanity by destroying the faces of these conventionally attractive queer men.

form of self-hatred, and in so doing, absolving heterosexuals of their responsibility for antigay violence.³

If Ser Qarl has to “kill” Laenor, it is not because he wants to; it is because that is the only pathway they can find to happiness. In other words, this intra-gay violence is birthed by external, heterosexist forces. Most importantly, the audience is left with this violent image of these gay lovers as the final image of queerness in the show, as while we know they made it into exile to live together, they are subsequently erased from the plot. Laenor’s fake death, then, is in many ways a real one; at the very least, the intra-gay violence here constitutes a narrative death for the only queer characters in the show.

Taking this reading even further, it can be argued that all of the significant conflict in *House of the Dragon* stems from Laenor’s queerness; his inability to have children with his wife Princess Rhaenyra engenders most of the violence and unhappiness in the series. Thus, even if Laenor’s ending has been called “the only happy ending in *House of the Dragon*” (Williams) and celebrated in social media for giving a “queer character [a] happy ending in [a] major departure from [the] books” (Iftikhar), such a reading that hastily celebrates any seemingly positive queer representation leaves out the many ways in which the series is deeply problematic in its depiction of the path to queer happiness. In fact, this troubling depiction of queerness is not new to George R. R. Martin’s television shows; *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019) depicted another quite similar love affair, in which one lover, Olyvar, betrays the other, Ser Loras Tyrell, furthering this narrative of intra-queer violence. Ser Loras ends up in prison for having slept with a man, has to renounce his titles and inheritance, and ends up dying as a result. Oberyn Martell, another queer

³ I have examined at length the way in which contemporary culture is riddled with such problematic depictions of intra-gay violence (gay bodies harming other gay bodies), see Gagnon “‘Replacing the Political with the Personal’: Myths of the Homophobic Homosexual in Baldwin, Isherwood, and Highsmith”

character in the series, has his skull gruesomely crushed—described by many as the most “brutal and horrific” death in the entire eight season series (Prom)—in much the same way as Ser Joffrey Lonmouth is killed in *House of the Dragon*, as previously discussed. In this manner, these series, which have been largely celebrated for their diverse and open representation of sexuality, and for allowing queer couples to have so-called “happy” endings, remain deeply invested in troubling depictions of queer violence, intra-queer betrayal, and the larger persisting trope of queer unhappiness.

This violent and tragic fate for queer characters invokes the “Bury Your Gays” trope—as a whole, queer characters are “viewed as more expendable than their heterosexual counterparts” and as such, “the supposed natural conclusion of their story is an early death” (*TV Tropes*). Rendering queer characters so expendable, both in terms of the gratuitous violence done to their bodies, but also the sudden and complete erasure of their bodies from plots, certainly has moral implications. Should audiences be led to believe that all gay lives are so violent or tragic? Are they (dare I say it) getting what they deserve? This rhetoric of unhappiness as “punishment,” affecting individuals who are to “blame” (Sontag 26) for their own unhappiness—as if queerness “contains by definition the seeds of its own destruction (Sontag 67)—effectively “redoubles the victimization of [queer] people” (Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 20). In other words, it locates the nexus of unhappiness within the queer body, so that not only are queer people unhappy, but they are blamed for an unhappiness that is structural and political in nature, rather than a personal ailment or responsibility.

These moral implications are particularly important in the case of a show like *Game of Thrones*, which gained an enormous audience; there are, without a doubt, very many people who were exposed to explicit scenes of homosexual sex for the first time while watching the show.

No washed down, nearly asexual relationships here like in some of the examples of normative queer happy couples I explore later, such as Mitchell Pritchett and Cameron Tucker from *Modern Family* (2009), another mainstream show with enormous reach. If, when thinking of queer relationships, people can only conjure up hyper-sexualized, violent, unhappy examples from shows like *House of the Dragon* and *Game of Thrones*, or normative almost non-sexual examples from *Modern Family*, what does that say about the possibilities for queer happiness? In sum, we must ask ourselves: what pathways lay before us; what pathways are truly available to us? Because, after all, it is difficult to take a path you do not know to exist.

ON THEORY: AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF (UN)HAPPINESS

To unearth something, to speculate about its use, its meaning, and the socioeconomic context that might have brought it about is the work of archaeology. An archaeology of happiness, then, would seek to first mystify happiness; it would discard happiness, letting layers and layers of dirt and dust build up on top, and only once happiness was forgotten, something of a distant past, neither understood or misunderstood, only *then* would it be dug up and examined. “Happiness,” like “homophobia,”⁴ has become a catch-all term which mystifies as much as it clarifies the phenomena it describes. Who, in reality, is happy? Does calling oneself happy suffice? Is happiness an emotion, an affect, an orientation, a state of being? In this manner, I suggest that we must first discard happiness to understand it—or perhaps, should I say, we must discard the myth of happiness; replacing it with other, more potent myths. We must answer “Do you want to be happy?” with a deep resounding “No”—not because we want to be unhappy, nor because we are masochistic, but because we no longer know what it means to be “Happy,” after so many layers of dirt and grime have built up on top.

At the same time, answering “no” to the potential promise of happiness is a rejection of normative pathways to happiness. Why attempt to be happy when those who have the power over distinguishing and labelling certain life courses as happy and others as unhappy disregard your very lifestyle? When their interests have always already been at odds with your own? When being happy can only ever be achieved by emulating a privileged happiness—privilege one knows most queer people do not have access to? In other words, a queer orientation might be ontologically opposed to the promise of happiness; being queer and happy might thereby be impossible.

⁴ See Gregory Herek “Beyond ‘Homophobia’” for a similar archaeology of homophobia.

Few of us are truly “just trying to be happy,” despite what mothers might say to their children when they come out. The “just” in “I just want you to be happy” is ambiguous; Ahmed defines it as the way in which “the loved other [...] hesitates with the signifier ‘just’” (92). A parent clearly does not *only* want their queer child to be happy—they have other desires, for themselves as well as for their children. The “just” appears so often in that utterance precisely because parents have other desires. They might want grandchildren, or for their child to get married, or at the very least, to have a stable healthy monogamous relationship. The “just” in “I just want you to be happy” often stands-in for some normative desire for their child’s lifecourse that might stand in the way of their child’s happiness, something that the parent has to put aside, a sacrifice they make, in order to let their child be happy. The “just” makes its way into the statement as a nod to the sacrifice the parent alleges to be making. In the name of “just” happiness, normative desires for a child’s life path can be cast aside, because knowing that their child is happy is sufficient. At the same time, it is often the case that queer children “cannot bear the thought of not living the life [their] parents have imagined for [them]” (Ahmed 105), and thereby give in to their parents’ desires.

Having said that, being “just” happy does not sound particularly attractive. Normativity, despite being cast aside by a parent in their utterance, often resurfaces. In fact, it is in the very nature of normativity to resurface; despite its socially constructed nature, what is considered “normal” is also believed to be the default, something one can and should return to. In other words, it is one thing to be happy, but being *perceived as happy* is quite different. When a parent tells their queer child “I just want you to be happy,” the “just” is also a residual reminder of the gap between what the child might feel (happy, unhappy, satisfied, confused, or other), and what the parent perceives the child as feeling. Written differently, the utterance goes: “Whether or not

I perceive you as happy, if you say you are happy, I will be satisfied.” But whether that satisfaction is authentic is dubious.

It is no wonder, then, that the most visible instances of queer happiness in contemporary culture are incredibly normative ones. When everyone can agree about what constitutes happiness, everyone is also happy. A central tenet of my argument is that the impulse of normative happiness is felt by queer people because it is often portrayed as the only possibility for them; being “merely” happy, in a normative way, no matter how unattractive it might sound, is still better than being unhappy. With such unhappy and tragic depictions of queer living so culturally omnipresent (so much so that queer unhappiness is often fetishized, as I argue later), normative happiness is seen as a blessing, rather than a sacrifice.

In this manner, if we must answer “No” to the question “Do you want to be happy?”, it is because being “just” happy, with the normative impulse therein, is not enough. That is not to say that normative happiness is somehow not real, or lesser; we are not trying to be different purely for the sake of being different and feeling different! Rather, the trouble with normative happiness is that it is hegemonic; in its capacity to be perceived as the “default” it conceals the deeply troubling reality that normative happiness is a privilege. Being “just” happy, it turns out, is not only unattractive—it is also disturbingly unattainable for queer individuals.

The most visible depictions of queer happiness in contemporary culture are of white gay men, with comfortable, affluent lifestyles, and who are often married and have children. Aside from the sexual orientation of the characters, every aspect of such happy lifestyles speaks of privilege. We will later closely examine two such depictions that simultaneously affirm normative queer happiness while also challenging it: the sitcoms *Modern Family* (2009) and *Schitt's Creek* (2015). These TV shows are particularly of interest because of their reach; as

mainstream depictions of gay family life, they go on to shape what parents imagine as possibilities for their children when they say something like “I just want you to be happy,” and in turn, what queer people think of in conceiving of their own futures.

Notably, depictions of normative queer happiness can be celebrated despite their constitutive privilege, particularly in the face of the heterosexist fetishization of intraqueer violence and of tragic unhappy queer life stories. For instance, *Modern Family* and *Schitt's Creek* have been celebrated by the queer community (Kornhaber; Linnell). This is because, while such normative depictions are the most common forms of queer happiness available in mainstream contemporary culture, queer happiness as a whole is still relatively rare. In summary, as an introduction to the theoretical background upon which this thesis builds, we turn to this quotation by Donna Haraway:

Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true. (*Manifestly Haraway* 5)

In this sense, there is something ironic about queer (un)happiness—of course queer people *want* to be happy, and being normatively happy can still be “true” happiness, even if it discounts the happiness of other queer individuals. At the same time, if being happy means not really being yourself, if it means giving in to assimilation, then you are not actually happy *and* queer, but rather, queer *but* happy. Discarding happiness, then, often becomes a means for queer individuals to attain another form of happiness, which has perhaps not completely taken a coherent shape as of yet. Happiness is in a sense incompatible with queerness, even though both can exist alongside each other without resolving into a larger whole.

Theoretical Background

The call to discard happiness evokes a debate within contemporary queer theory between what is dubbed “the antisocial thesis” (Caserio 819), or the politics of negativity and antirelationality, and its opposite, which is broadly articulated as “queer optimism” (Dean 827). On the one hand, the antisocial thesis questions “what embracing negativity must mean, can mean, should mean for people’s imaginaries of power and about how to live” (Berlant and Edelman 5). In other words, the antisocial thesis posits that by embracing what is traditionally seen as “negative,” or hegemonically associated with unhappiness, one can imagine another life path, one that might not lead to happiness, yet steers one towards more sustainable, authentic ways of queer living.

Lee Edelman, one of the principal architects of queer political negativity, advances the concept of “the Futurch” (“Antagonism” 821), the Church of the Future, which has come to replace the role of religion in Western society in his analysis. The Futurch has at its heart children, the family unit, and the nation (as a proxy to the family). Edelman’s main critique of queer optimism is that “proponents of liberal utopianism” form “a hymn [with] the Futurch even while dressed in heretical drag” (821). In other words, Edelman views queer optimism as hypocritical. He quotes Theodor Adorno to make his point: “Society stays alive, not despite its antagonism, but by means of it” (qtd. in Edelman 821). In other words, Edelman’s articulation of the antisocial thesis posits that its opposite, queer positivity, ends up reinforcing the very structures of power it seeks to oppose by not embracing the stark refusal and negativity he calls for. Queer optimism is simply not radical enough, and cannot help but lead “us back to the Futurch,” whereas “the aim of queer negativity is rather to hammer [the idols of the Futurch] into the dust” (822) by “embrac[ing] the negativity that we, as queer subjects, structurally represent”

(Halberstam 823). Such an argument undergirds chapter three of this thesis, on normative queer (un)happiness.

Robert L. Caserio has deconstructed this theoretical debate by arguing that rather than being antisocial and antirelational in their opposition to “biological reproduction” (820) and the cult of the Future more broadly, queerness is “not more arelational than its alternative [heterosexuality]” (820). If queer individuals have evoked how ineffective the institutions of marriage and biological futurism have been in recent decades, heterosexuals have done so as well—the recent “unparalleled assault on heterosexual institutions” of “marriage and children and their insurance of [happy] futures” has been carried first and foremost “by heterosexuals” (820). One need only think of the countless heterosexual divorces portrayed in contemporary culture. Put differently, Caserio argues that queer people are less antisocial than othersocial, as they do not inherently oppose the lifepaths that the majority is oriented towards and invested in. If that is the case, it is no wonder that the majority would be so discursively invested in depictions of normative queer happiness, which would (they hope) have the effect of solidifying heterosexist institutions they know (but would never admit) to be falling apart. Seeing someone so different live such a similar lifestyle to yours, and most importantly, be happy doing so, goes a long way towards reaffirming and relegitimizing your normative life choices.

In this manner, the queer orientation of questioning the heterosexual institutions of marriage, reproductive futurism, and monogamy, has simply forecasted the orientation of the masses. In this light, Tim Dean has argued that the antisocial thesis in queer theory originates in part “in right-wing fantasies about how ‘the homosexual agenda’ undermines the social fabric” (826). In other words, if homosexuality is seen as threatening because it “fail[s] to reproduce the family in a recognizable form” (826), homosexuality also surfaces as a scapegoat for

heterosexuals who wish to dissociate themselves from their own failure to reproduce the family and the couple form with the same sanctity with which they inherited it.

If the antisocial turn in queer theory “impel[s] us to explore what follows—affectively, narratively, and politically—from the persistence of negativity in every practice of repair” (Berlant and Edelman xv), queer optimism, on the other hand, embraces a reparative hermeneutics as part of “the essential need for an understanding of queerness as collectivity” (Muñoz 825). José Esteban Muñoz, the chief theorist of queer optimism or “utopianism” as he calls it, criticizes scholars of the antisocial thesis for being led “to an impasse wherein they cannot see futurity for the life of them” (826). He borrows from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s work on paranoia and reparative analytical practices to articulate his turn away from queer pessimism in favor of optimism; the pessimistic, paranoid mode dominant within queer studies, which embraces “the knowledge that their own lives [as queer people] are blighted and doomed” (Edelman, *No Future* 40), has in many ways “ceased to be critical” (Muñoz 826) in his analysis. As Robyn Wiegman has summarized it:

Reparation, on the other hand, is for Sedgwick about learning how to build small worlds of sustenance that cultivate a different present and future for the losses that one has suffered. You could say that it is about loving what hurts but instead of using that knowledge to prepare for a vigilant stand against repetition, it responds to the future with affirmative richness. (11)

Sedgwick’s reparative mode acknowledges the “unmystified, angry view of large and genuinely systemic oppressions” (“Paranoid” 124) intrinsic to much queer theory, but crucially argues that it is not self-evident that such a paranoid view of the world really *does* anything to improve one’s condition. As she puts it, the paranoid mode inherent to the antisocial thesis operates on

[the] cruel and contemptuous assumption that the one thing lacking for global revolution, explosion of gender roles, or whatever, is people's (that is, other people's) having the painful effects of their oppression, poverty, or deludedness sufficiently exacerbated to make the pain conscious (as if otherwise it wouldn't have been) and intolerable (as if intolerable situations were famous for generating excellent solutions). (144)

In other words, queer optimism and the reparative practices it embraces are in many ways an attempt to tip the scales, to balance out a long history of an unsustainably paranoid queer theory, and in turn, queer lived experience. In sum, "faced with the depressing realization that people are fragile and the world hostile," the reparative mode that undergirds queer optimism moves beyond "the exposure of political outrages that we already know about," in favor of "the process of reconstructing a sustainable life" (Hanson 105) in the wake of these outrages.

Sara Ahmed's work in *The Promise of Happiness*, the core theoretical text in this thesis, borrows from both sides of this theoretical dialogue, seeking to shed the distinction between positivity and negativity altogether. As she argues:

What concerns me is how much this affirmative turn actually depends on the very distinction between good and bad feelings that presumes that bad feelings are backward and conservative and good feelings are forward and progressive. ("Happy Objects" 50)

At the same time, her primary concern remains with "histories that hurt" (50), not queer optimism. She "refus[es] to put bad feelings" (50) aside. In fact, she argues that "it is the very exposure of these unhappy effects" of happiness "that is affirmative, that gives us an alternative set of imaginings of what might count as a good or better life" (50). In other words, she approaches the possibilities of queer positivity through queer negativity. As she summarizes it: "if injustice does have unhappy effects, then the story does not end there" (50). It is thereby clear

that Ahmed is deeply indebted to Sedgwick's reparative vision of a different future for queer individuals, yet she insists on the productivity of negativity, refusing to be too paranoid or too "optimistic".

Digging Up the Happiness

Having introduced Sara Ahmed and positioned her within (or, in truth, "without") this debate at the core of queer theory, we return to Ahmed's premise that certain groups of people are always "already imagined as being unhappy" (80). People of color, women, queer people, all appear on this list of individuals who seemingly can never be satisfied (in the hegemonic view). In tracing depictions of how "the queer life is already constructed as an unhappy life" (93), Ahmed seeks to deconstruct the hegemonic assumption that there is a certain unhappiness inherent in queerness. As Lee Edelman has put it very bluntly: "There is a growing understanding [by the oppressing majority] that we [as queers] created a culture that in effect murdered us" (Edelman, *No Future* 40). Murder, here, takes on a dual connotation; on the one hand, there is "the murderous representations of homosexuals unleashed and 'legitimized'" (Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave?* 28) by HIV/AIDS, and other depictions of intra-queer violence. On the other hand, the impossibility to be happy is seen as a self-inflicted wound, a murder of the self of sorts.

If queerness is always already imagined as unhappiness, as a misadjustment in a world where "happiness demands adjusting your body to a world that has already taken shape" (Ahmed 79), the irony, of course, is that "gay" once meant "happy and full of fun" (*Oxford*). In other words, at a certain point (perhaps counterintuitively in light of "the world demands that gay life be ultimately sad"), "gay" denoted happiness. I stress this return to the archaic definition of

“gay,” as part of being gay has always been to perform an outward happiness, often to entertain heterosexual women (as we will see later in HBO’s *The White Lotus*).

In fact, Susan Sontag has argued that gay men in the decades before HIV/AIDS came to embody (stereotypically) the apogee of enjoyment in “the ideology of capitalism” (77), with their unapologetic interest in “consumption” and “self-improvement” (77), “sexual voracity” (76) and “recreational [...] sexuality” (77). It is no wonder then that this extreme capitalist enjoyment has been culturally fetishized. Even today, an image persists of gay men in particular as having more fun than heterosexuals, indulging in endless sexual encounters, partying, drugs, alcohol, gossiping, shopping, ... At the same time, “enjoying” the outward performance of “happiness” of certain highly visible gay men has often served as a moral indulgence for heterosexuals who might not be comfortable with other forms of queerness that challenge their ideological investments in more radical ways.

I argue that the gay performance of light-heartedness, of being carefree and *happy*, is often no more than an attempt to “pass” as happy; as Ahmed writes about the housewife, who is expected to perform a similar outward display of happiness: “I am not fine, like you, my life is about maintaining the appearance of being fine, an appearance which is also a disappearance” (76). The work of passing as happy is often no more than the work of killing the self, to disappear in order to escape being the one always already imagined as being unhappy. At the same time, passing as happy also kills the political implications of unhappiness. The requirement of performing happiness is no more than an assent, a giving of consent, to structural inequalities.

In sum, an archaeology of happiness and unhappiness reveals something political about being happy, rather than merely the psychological aspect. (Un)happiness is structural, systemic, and deeply rooted in morality, rather than simply a descriptor of how one feels, or of the quality

of one's life. Often, (un)happy depictions serve the purpose of "obscur[ing] the true sources of [oppression]" (Herek 13), by either distracting audiences with gratuitous depictions of queer happiness that are impulsively celebrated, or naturalizing queer unhappiness, making it seem as if "queers feel sad or wretched right from the beginning" (Ahmed 98). This motion of obscuring the true source of oppression entails replacing "political explanations (in terms of structural, economic, and institutional oppression)" with "personal explanations (in terms of the dark workings of the psyche, the mysterious functioning of the subconscious)" (Kitzinger, "Speaking of Oppression" 5). In doing so, "victim blaming" ensues, not only "depoliticizing" (Kitzinger 4) queer unhappiness, but turning it into "a game of 'why are you hitting yourself?'" (King-Miller). In other words, queer people are rendered responsible for the unhappiness that heterosexist society coerces them into.

Thus, as Ahmed argues, happiness is "a political myth that does things" (79). It does not mean that happiness is so politicized and moralized, however, that queer people must altogether abandon trying to be happy. Instead, one must complicate one's relationship to happiness in the way that Ahmed does by way of irony, perhaps, as Haraway suggests. Or, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has translated from Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, "contradicting logic, we must learn to use and erase our language at the same time" (xviii); as queer people, we must learn to inhabit "happiness" and erase it at the same time.

1: THE WORLD THAT READS QUEERS AS UNHAPPY

On Gay Villains

“Going off nothing but media, I learned that being queer meant having an entire life rooted in secrets, trauma, violence, and self-hatred.” (Viruet)

In season 2 of HBO’s *The White Lotus* (2022), Quentin, a wealthy gay man in Sicily with his band of gay friends, goes to a showing of Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly*. He brings Tanya, his newfound heterosexual friend to the opera, because “after hearing the story of [her] love life,” he and his gay friends “decided [she was] like a tragic heroine in a Puccini opera” (“That’s Amore” 29:40). *The White Lotus* thereby invokes an age-old trope of the “gay best friends” who crowd around a beautiful, tragic, female figure to give her advice and to appreciate the beauty of her tragic love life. This is a two-way relationship, however, as Tanya fetishizes Quentin and his friends as well, saying: “If you’re looking for a friend, gay guys are really the best. Because, let’s face it, women are kinda... depressing,” and “These gay guys are fun!” (“In the Sandbox” 43:43). This evokes Ahmed’s argument that homosexual men have been pushed towards a code of conduct “premised on making other people happy” (Ahmed 252) by hegemonic forces, in order to bury their potentially politically subversive unhappiness.

In discussing the opera afterwards, Quentin quotes Gore Vidal, explaining to Tanya that he is the same: “I can understand companionship. I can understand bought sex in the afternoon, but I cannot understand the love affair” (“That’s Amore” 51:57). His attraction to Tanya, in other words, stems from his own inability to fall in love, which contrasts with her tragedy of repeatedly falling in love with men who betray her—not only is Tanya like a heroine from a Puccini piece, but hearing about Tanya’s love life *is entertaining in the same way* as the opera.

Thus, Quentin and his gay friends are in a sense inverting the trope of the fetishization of queer unhappiness by fetishizing Tanya's unhappy heterosexual life.

Quentin's immunity to tragedy, however, in his inability to actually "understand the love affair," has several implications that *The White Lotus* refuses to flesh out. Quentin explains that he no longer feels love, he only seeks beauty; he has only been in love once, when he was young, with a heterosexual man, whose lack of interest for him "only added to the torturous pleasure" ("That's Amore" 53:05). While not only, once again, troublingly associating a gay character with the fetishizing of pain, this passage renders gay love defective. For a show that focuses primarily on portraying the complexities of relationships, and the inextricable contradictory impulses that undergird people's love lives, this gay inability to fall in love is quite simplistic.

If Quentin and his gay friends are not depicted as being capable of love, and thereby lacking in some respect, a lack that leads to them being unsatisfied and unhappy, does it follow that they *deserve* to be unhappy? *The White Lotus* seems to suggest so, because, as it turns out, just as I have previously argued with *House of the Dragon*, the central conflict in the show stems from the actions of gay characters and, more revealingly, *gay violence*. *The White Lotus* is, after all, centrally about "karmic payment" ("Arrivederci" 12:35) or people getting what they deserve for behaving unethically. Quentin and his gay band, it turns out, were only pretending to be attracted to Tanya's tragic love life. In reality, they wanted to lure her away from The White Lotus hotel so they could have her murdered, and for her husband, who was secretly in alliance with Quentin, to inherit all her wealth. Upon unveiling this plan, Tanya steals a gun and kills the gay friends. In trying to escape, Tanya drowns, and her body washes up on shore at The White Lotus resort. The finding of her body is the opening scene of the show, motivating all subsequent intrigue.

A reading of *The White Lotus* alongside Leo Bersani's 1987 essay "Is the Rectum a Grave?" is quite illuminating; the show can be said to reinforce the "imagined or real promiscuity for which gay men are so famous," in the form of an "insatiable desire" (Bersani 16) for sex, entirely lacking any desire for love. In fact, Quentin is stereotypically "far from apologizing for [his] promiscuity as a failure to maintain a loving relationship" (Bersani 25). More notably, however, *The White Lotus* also makes interesting claims about "the association of gay men" and their promiscuity with "murderousness" (17)—particularly after HIV/AIDS, where gay men, "those being killed," were depicted as "killers," seen "as the cause and source of AIDS" (17). In fact, Quentin's character first gains its "villainous" status in a scene where we see him having receptive anal sex with his "nephew" Jack (who turns out to be an escort of sorts and unrelated to Quentin), evoking the "seductive and intolerable image of a grown man, legs high in the air" (Bersani 18). In other words, Quentin's place as a villain in *The White Lotus* is inextricable from his sexuality. By depicting these gay men as villains, the show cites the narrative trope of homosexuals as "inherently ruinous," binding "homosexuality to death" (Benedicto 280) in such a way to render "homosexual desire [...] potentially suicidal" (275).

In turn, the gay men in the show are not only homicidal, but they also get gorily killed for their violent intent, and their death is depicted as a sort of cathartic resolution to the show—as if they deserve the violent unhappy ending that befalls them—or, as if they brought it on to themselves, as a sort of homosexual suicidal intent. I am not implying that portrayals of gay villains are immoral, and any such depictions of homosexuality should be "cancelled"; after all, Christopher Isherwood, the author of *A Single Man* (1964), which shall be discussed in chapter two, wrote: "we now run into another liberal heresy. *Because* the persecuting majority is vile, says the liberal, *therefore* the persecuted minority must be stainlessly pure. Can't you see what

nonsense that is? What's to prevent the bad from being persecuted by the worse?" (54). In the same way that I do not call for *only* happy depictions of queer lifestyles, queer characters should not *only* be "good guys". I do, however, question this simplistic rendering of the gay characters and their motivations in *The White Lotus*, particularly when so much effort is spent in depicting the psychological complexities of their heterosexual counterparts. Most importantly, however, such depictions reinforce the image of gay men as greedy, immoral, self-obsessed, and unlovable/unloving—an image that is already all too omnipresent, evoking how neverending "the work required to counter the perception of your life as being unhappy" (Ahmed 94) can be.

I want to emphasize this last point, as not only is Quentin unable to feel love—he only cares about wealth—he and his gay friends are depicted as not "deserving" love and happiness. Further, it is one thing to not deserve happiness, but quite another to *deserve unhappiness*. Most importantly, these gay characters are also not deserving of life, apparently, as their violent death is depicted as a karmic repayment for their immoral actions. Of course, *The White Lotus* is not suggesting that such associations are true for all homosexuals, but any such simplistic depiction of minority groups carries that risk. This is the core argument of this first chapter; in depicting queer characters as unhappy and morally vile, one is inadvertently making a statement about what kind of lives queer people can live, but also the lives they *deserve* to live. In other words, not only do such gratuitous depictions reinforce "the very presumption that a queer life is necessarily and inevitably an unhappy life" (Ahmed 94), but they make statements about "who is entitled to happiness" (51).

Queer Love is Doomed

If the gay characters in *The White Lotus* cannot feel love, what about contemporary depictions of queer love? How do they hold up to scrutiny? In the first season of the ABC legal

thriller *How to Get Away with Murder* (2014),⁵ Connor Walsh, an overachieving gay man who is quite promiscuous, starts dating Oliver Hampton, a computer hacker. Their relationship is riddled with insecurities; *HTGAWM* quite lazily cites the trope of gay male unfaithfulness, depicting gay relationships as inherently unfulfilling. While Oliver wants more out of his relationship with Connor, after discovering Connor's continued unfaithfulness, Oliver hooks up with a stranger while drunk and contracts HIV. While cheating is a core theme of *HTGAWM* for all characters, regardless of their sexual orientation, the consequences here, for the gay couple, are taken to another level. Connor blames himself for Oliver being reckless and getting sick; yet Connor's self-blame does not help Oliver with his illness in any way. Blame turns Connor inwards, back in on himself, rather than opening up to Oliver and giving him the recognition he is so desperately asking for. In a sense, what Oliver truly wanted from the beginning is "the ultimate [...] recognition - commitment" (Illouz 133), yet *HTGAWM* season one portrays gay relationships as almost masturbatory, only about the self, entirely lacking recognition for the other—no wonder they are so unfulfilling, portrayed in this light.

Oliver's emotional labor—stemming from his desire for a fulfilling romantic and sexual relationship with another man—builds up to the point where it completely wears him out. If recognition is what he seeks, gay relationships in the show can only deliver recognition as a "transaction," a form of recognition that might "affirm [...] you without, again, necessarily feeling good" (Berlant 96). Oliver is portrayed as a gay man who is still invested in the promise of happiness, particularly the promise attached to modern love and the couple form, but he becomes simply "worn out by these promises" (98). If I stress the words "transaction" and "emotional *labor*," it is because homosexual relationships in the show assume an economical

⁵ Hereafter referred to as *HTGAWM*

form. Oliver experiences the very real *costs* of one-sided commitment, so much so that his body is infected with an incurable disease as a result. In fact, the entire relationship between Connor and Oliver begins as a purely transactional one; Connor sleeps with Oliver in return for his hacking skills, and Connor even first cheats on Oliver with another man in order to get intel about a legal case he is working on.

The economics of gay love can be taken even further in the analysis of *HTGAWM*. Having invested himself in Connor emotionally, Oliver feels as if he cannot pull out of this investment, even if it is not an emotionally profitable one. Love, to him, has become nothing more than a “promise of the promise” (Berlant 110), a form of cruel optimism, to use Berlant’s terminology. Unsurprising, these male-male sexual “transactions” (and relationships) in the show are depicted as unfulfilling, yet, notably, even Oliver’s orientation towards a more heteronormative lifestyle—his desire for monogamy, and a more traditional “couple form”—is also unfulfilling. Perhaps *HTGAWM* posits that Oliver’s “deviant body” is unable to assimilate the “straight line” (Ahmed 567). In any case, if “happiness,” understood as a symptom of a fulfilling relationship, is not achievable either through gay sex or gay monogamy, what does *HTGAWM* communicate, in the end, about the possibilities (or rather, impossibilities) for gay love and gay happiness?

To elaborate on the “cruel optimism” of this relationship: Oliver keeps “re-turning” to his relationship with Connor “because of what it promises” (Collu 301), despite the fact that the relationship is an “obstacle to [his] flourishing” (Berlant 1). Oliver is in effect “affectively possessed” (Collu 293) by the fantasy of love, by the “couple-image” (301). This affective possession builds up to the point where Oliver needs to be “dispossessed” and to “discharge” (305). The scene in which Oliver decides to get drunk and hookup with a stranger, cheating on

his cheating boyfriend, can be read as this discharge—a discharge that involves an actual sexual discharge, a viral discharge, one that comes to threaten Oliver’s “well-being” quite physically. Thus, Oliver’s cruel optimism is cruel because it leads not only to psychic harm but also to bodily harm. The discharge is oriented away from Oliver’s normal more monogamous orientation—it is ironic that Oliver gets HIV when Connor has been a lot more promiscuous and practiced more risky sex. In this sense, this discharge involves a “reorientation” (Ahmed 561); Oliver takes on Connor’s orientation towards casual sex to make him jealous, and to get revenge, in a sense saying “I can cheat on you too.” Thus, despite portraying two gay characters with different orientations towards sex and relationships—feigning diversity—in reality, both gay characters in *HTGAWM* are forced into the same mold, a reorientation that results in harm being done to the gay body. This harm, while not depicted as necessarily “deserved,” involves intra-gay violence once again, with Connor’s self-blame; in effect, Connor has done harm to Oliver’s body by pushing him into actions that led to him getting HIV.

If I belabor *HTGAWM* so much, it is because the show has been celebrated by the gay community for portraying a gay character who is “open and unapologetic about his sex life,” as a way to “right the wrong for all the straight sex that you see on TV”—in the words of the creator of the show, Peter Nowalk (qtd. in Bernstein). Despite some backlash for picking an actor who is straight to play Connor, and for employing “the HIV stereotype on a gay character” (Shae Rodriguez) in a cheap way, *HTGAWM*’s Connor and Oliver have become “a fan favorite couple” that are “at the forefront of gay representation” in contemporary television (Shae Rodriguez). What interests me most is that in order to counter the portrayal of gay characters as “somewhat neutered” (Bernstein)—portrayed as almost asexual in order to make queer sexualities more “relatable and respected” (Abad-Santos), as we will discuss in chapter 3—*HTGAWM* has gone to

the other extreme by depicting Connor in very explicit sex scenes that speak to an almost “aggressive sexuality” (Bernstein).

I choose to close read the show’s depiction of gay relationships as transactional and unfulfilling as the first season of *HTGAWM* exemplifies an important dilemma at the heart of any representation of minorities in mainstream media; should representation be about “reality,” even if that representation might verge on stereotypical? One fan of the show has said, for instance, “the show’s not that far-fetched. [Connor] can’t commit to the boyfriend, nobody makes a big deal of his sexuality, and he’s not carrying a rainbow flag. I like it” (qtd. in Bernstein). While gay men might have a more transactional relationship with sex than heterosexuals, and depicting that “reality” on television rather than a desexualized, censored version of gay life *should* be appreciated as a positive, diversified representation, it is also undeniable that Connor and Oliver are an incredibly unhealthy, dysfunctional, unhappy couple. If they have more gay sex than we usually see on television, that’s a positive, but that alone does not call for news headlines such as “*How to Get Away with Murder* has the hottest gay sex on television. That’s *progress*” (VOX; emphasis added). In fact, it *is not progress* if hot gay sex is purely an economic affair, an exchange that only takes place to get characters ahead in their careers, or to get back at each other emotionally and results in the contraction of an incurable virus. “Hot gay sex” becomes not about enjoyment, but only about self-advancement and, at worst, self-harm.

In this manner, for a show to have a realistic representation of one aspect of queer living does not intrinsically or necessarily enjoin us as viewers to make any specific claims about the positive contribution of the show to “the prospect for changing how we inhabit and relate to the world” (Berlant and Edelman xvi).⁶ “Veracity” has been given excessive importance in the

⁶ I am indebted here to Eve Segwick’s analysis of deconstructive critical practices (124).

representation of minorities by minorities. A gay villain does not intrinsically entail “good” or “bad” representation, as does uncensored gay sex, or even, happy or unhappy endings for queer characters—as Ahmed puts it, there are both “risks [in] promot[ing] queer happiness” (106), but also, “to narrate unhappiness can be affirmative” (107). Instead, if we are to think about the reach many of the mainstream cultural artefacts I discuss in this thesis have attained, what matters is not their veracity. Instead, what matters is the way in which one can both appreciate the political potency of the unhappy queer, but also ask ourselves “how is queer happiness imagined once we get there?” (Ahmed 108).

Another example of the “the tragic and miserable ending that seems to be the only available plot” (Ahmed 96) in depictions of queer people is Michael Cunningham’s novel *The Hours* (1998), which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, and its movie adaptation from 2002, which was equally as successful with nine Oscar nominations. Michael Cunningham is considered “a leading writer of gay fiction” (Watney 115), and *The Hours* in particular is concerned “with history, with gayness, and, yes, with AIDS” (115)—the reference to AIDS here is mentioned in this way (“yes, with AIDS”) because of how commonplace AIDS has become in narratives about queer people. *The Hours* is a peculiar work—it does not exactly romanticize unhappiness, the way we will see in the next chapter, and it does not have gay villains or stereotypically hypersexualized and commoditized queer relationships as in the previous case studies. Instead, *The Hours* presents an incredibly complex depiction of queer unhappiness in all its forms. It relentlessly associates queerness with depression in a way that is constructive and thought provoking—as so many queer people deal with depression, which brings us back to Ahmed’s statement that “we can see why telling stories about queer unhappiness might matter”

(94). At the same time, the work also perpetuates the ideological association of queerness with negativity, the “seemingly inevitable tragic ending” (Ahmed 103) of queer lives, undoing much of “the work required to counter the perception of your life [or your style of living] as being unhappy” (94). The work required to counter this perception feels necessary precisely because the unhappy are moralized in such a way as to be seen to somehow deserve their fate.

The Hours follows three alternating narratives of three queer women from different eras, Virginia Woolf (1923), Laura Brown (1949), and Clarissa Vaughan (1999). The final queer protagonist is Clarissa’s best friend Richard, a bisexual man who is dying of AIDS. While defining the sexual orientation of these women is difficult—Virginia and Laura simply kiss other women and express desire for women, whereas only Clarissa is more clearly in a relationship with a woman—they are all nevertheless queer in some form or another. The novel and the film, at their core, are about possibilities and the promises they seem to contain—most importantly, the promise of happiness. Thus, Cunningham writes: “at this moment there are infinite possibilities, whole hours ahead” (34), and describes characters by the possibilities their lives can take: “an imperious, clever young man who might or might not, with the help of a battery of drugs, live out his normal span” (21). This last quotation, about a gay man who is sick with HIV/AIDS, reminds us that while there are infinite possibilities in our lives, in this queer novel about possibilities, the promise of happiness is not held out to everyone. *The Hours* is in this sense an instantiation of Lee Edelman’s *No Future*: the queer characters in this story can feel the promises held out to others for their futures, they can see people worshipping at the church of the future, but that future always leaves them out of the equation. Laura, for instance, looks at her happy husband and child, and thinks: “the room seems almost impossibly full: full of the lives of her husband and son; full of the future” (207), but not full of *her* future because of her queerness.

Thus, Clarissa, finding it “impossible not to imagine that other future, that rejected future” (97) where she could have been happy, realizes that she had only ever felt “the beginning of happiness” (98), only the “promise” (98) of happiness, never the real thing. Clarissa examines her life with her lover Sally, and despite knowing that she is “a fortunate woman, professionally well regarded” (93), she feels lost in the home she has built with Sally:

[They had] bought all these things, she can remember every transaction, but she feels now that they are arbitrary, the spigot and the counter and the pots, the white dishes.

They are only choices, one thing and then another, yes or no, and she sees how easily she could slip out of this life—these empty and arbitrary comforts. She could simply leave it and return to her other home, where neither Sally nor Richard exists. [...] It is revealed to her that all her sorrow and loneliness, the whole creaking scaffold of it, stems simply from pretending to live in this apartment among these objects, with kind, nervous Sally, and that if she leaves she’ll be happy, or better than happy. She’ll be herself. She feels briefly, wonderfully alone, with everything ahead of her. (92)

In this sense, Clarissa feels as if the promise of happiness could be held out to her if she leaves her queer entourage, her best friend dying of AIDS and her lover. In other words, she could be happy if only she chose heteronormativity over queer intimacy. Instead, she always decides to stay with them, despite “all her sorrow and loneliness, the whole creaking scaffold of it”. Cunningham’s choice of “scaffold” here is particularly interesting, as it hints at how Clarissa’s unhappiness stems from a structuralized, systemic inequality wherein queer people are made to be unhappy. The point here is that “it is not that queers feel sad or wretched right from the beginning,” but that “it is because the world is unhappy with queer love that queers become unhappy” (Ahmed 98). The promise of happiness is simply not held out by the world to the queer

characters in this narrative. And yet, *The Hours* cannot help but perpetuate this depiction of queers “feeling sad or wretched right from the beginning,” because the cause of their unhappiness is so difficult to identify. In not knowing who to blame, it is easy to blame oneself for one’s own unhappiness, even if its cause is not from within, but from without. Richard kills himself towards the end of the novel, as he is already dying of AIDS, “disappearing into his illness, his insanity” (Cunningham 91), only reinforcing this inability to identify the source of unhappiness, and the depiction of queer characters as doomed to live tragic lives. Thus, once again, the structuralization of queer unhappiness (the “political” in Kitzinger’s terminology) becomes obscured by “depoliticizing [...] victim blaming” (Kitzinger 4), justifying queer unhappiness with “personal explanations” (5), rather than political ones.

The novel ends with a summary of the tragic decisions all the characters have taken, only ever having “aspirational hopes for a good life,” while having to settle with “the queer struggle for a bearable life” (Ahmed 120). While Clarissa, the most contemporary of the timelines, lives the closest to a “good life,” suggesting a possible hope for the future, her life is still empty, in great part due to her best friend’s tragic fate—dying of AIDS and deciding to end his life. Thus, Cunningham writes:

We throw our parties; we abandon our families to live alone in Canada; we struggle to write books that do not change the world, despite our gifts and our unstinting efforts, our most extravagant hopes. [...] A few jump out of windows or drown themselves or take pills; more die by accident; and most of us, the vast majority, are slowly devoured by some disease or, if we’re fortunate, by time itself. There’s just this for consolation: an hour here or there when our lives seem, against all odds and expectations, to burst open and give us everything we’ve ever imagined, though everyone [...] knows these hours

will inevitably be followed by others, far darker and more difficult. Still, we cherish the city, the morning; we hope, more than anything, for more.” (225)

Thus, perhaps knowing he has perpetuated this ideological association of queerness with unhappiness in this portrayal of queer lives, Cunningham ends the novel with some hope, yet he is never able to relinquish the hold of the darker difficult hours of struggle that lay ahead for most queer lives.

2: THE FETISHIZATION OF QUEER UNHAPPINESS

The Disavowal of Queer Loss

“Let us even go so far as to say that this kind of relationship can sometimes be almost beautiful—particularly if one of the parties is already dead; or, better yet, both.”

(Isherwood 16)

In describing what she names the “disavowal of [queer] loss” (110), Sara Ahmed writes that “without recognition, even one’s grief cannot be supported or held by the kindness of another” (109). This concept of “recognition” is important; after all, “the experience of (and the demand for) recognition” (Illouz 123) is essential for the shaping of one’s “self-image” (111). The core issue with the heterosexual fetishization of queer unhappiness is that after decades of disavowing queer loss, any recognition is mistaken for good recognition. This means that recognition that takes away from queer loss, turning it back towards the oppressive majority, has become constitutive of the self-image of many queer individuals. This fetishization, in turn, can be said to appropriate queer unhappiness by turning it into heterosexual happiness.

While perhaps *not* an example from contemporary culture, Christopher Isherwood’s novel *A Single Man* (1964) nevertheless brilliantly illustrates how the disavowal of queer loss can be self-imposed, in anticipation of fetishization; I argue that such dynamics are still very much visible in contemporary culture. *A Single Man* takes place over the course of a single day in the life of George, a gay professor who is mourning the recent death of his partner Jim. Throughout the novel, George thinks back on his life with Jim and contemplates suicide. In one noteworthy passage early on in the novel, George remarks about his neighbour: “How dearly Mrs Strunk would enjoy being sad about Jim! But, aha, she doesn’t know ; none of them know”

(16). In this manner, George knows that his homophobic neighbors would “enjoy being sad” about his lover’s tragic death; in other words, he anticipates their fetishization of his pain. In response, he hides from them, and from everyone in his immediate entourage, the truth of Jim’s death. As a result, George must go about his day pretending to be functional, without recognition of his grief from others, and most importantly, he must completely internalize the mourning of his lover’s death. He must, in a way, pretend that Jim never existed. This lack of recognition destroys George, and ironically, makes for a terribly tragic book that many heterosexuals might very well fetishize in turn. Thus, *A Single Man* cannot help but rehearse being a queer story one would “enjoy being sad about”.

Notably, it is not shame of his homosexuality that motivates George to hide his lover’s death from others, but loathing of their loathing and their fetishizing of his unhappiness. It is for this very reason that I invoke *A Single Man* here despite it not fitting my subject matter of “contemporary culture”; George’s behavior is not typical of what we would expect from a character from the early 1960s. Take his forward-looking philosophy in this passage for instance, which illustrates George’s contempt for those who would find joy in his pain: “All are, in the last analysis, responsible for Jim’s death; this words, their thoughts, their whole way of life willed it, even though they never knew he existed” (26). At no point is George at all ashamed or self-conscious of his love of another man; instead, he is filled with hatred, looking for who to blame for the antigay politics that make grieving his lover an impossibility.

By arguing that these people, “three quarters of the population of America” (26), are responsible for Jim’s death, he does not mean that they killed him; rather, he means that they killed who Jim actually was: his lover. They destroyed the possibility for George to feel grief for his dead lover, and most importantly, for that grief to be recognized by others. Instead, George

hides his death from his entourage, tells them Jim moved away, and pretends that everything is “okay”—evoking the self-disavowal of queer loss. No one but George’s closest friend can recognize how meaningful Jim’s death is to him. In attempting to avoid the pain of having others “enjoy being sad about” his gay tragedy, to fetishize it by making “this kind of relationship” “beautiful—particularly if one of the parties is already dead; or, better yet, both” (Isherwood 16), George is unable to process his own grief. In so doing, Jim becomes a sort of nothingness: “when George gets in as deep as this, Jim hardly matters any more. Jim is nothing, now, but an excuse for hating three quarters of the population of America” (26)—those who would fetishize his death.

George’s description of how he was informed about Jim’s death by Jim’s family reflects how pervasive the disavowal of queer loss can truly be:

An uncle of Jim's whom he'd never met—trying to be sympathetic, even admitting George's right to a small honorary share in the sacred family grief—but then, as they talked, becoming a bit chilled by George's laconic Yes, I see, yes, his curt No, thank you, to the funeral invitation—deciding no doubt that this much talked of roommate hadn't been such a close friend, after all... And then, at least five minutes after George had put down the phone when the first shock wave hit, when the meaningless news suddenly meant exactly what it said, his blundering gasping run up the hill in the dark, his blind stumbling on the steps, banging at Charley's door, crying blubbing howling on her shoulder, in her lap, all over her; and Charley squeezing him, stroking his hair, telling him the usual stuff one tells... Late next afternoon, as he shook himself out of the daze of the sleeping pills she'd given him, he felt only disgust: I betrayed you, Jim; I betrayed our life together; I made you into a sob story for a skirt. (Isherwood 101)

The denial of the true extent of George's loss goes so far that he does not even go to his lover's funeral, does not see his partner's face ever again; and all that, while maintaining a facade of being functional, of not being affected, pretending they "hadn't been [so] close"—in effect, having to deny even this "small honorary share in the sacred family grief". Once dead, Jim is no longer his lover, just a stranger mourned by a strange family. In queer relationships, as Ahmed argues, it is often "as if only family counts, as if other relationships are not real, or are simply not" (109)—a glaring, generative absence; an absence that does things, such as produce the entire plot of *A Single Man*.

Most notable, however, is not only the disavowal of the true meaning of this queer loss, but the way in which George is paranoid about it being fetishized by *anyone*, even those he loves. In other words, not only does the fetishization of his loss by his neighbor concern him, but the fetishizing by his best friend, Charley. Turning Jim's death into "a sob story for a skirt" is a sort of betrayal of his love for Jim, something that creates disgust in George because he realizes the binary nature of queer unhappiness; he either has to almost apathetically pretend that he is not invested in histories that hurt, that he is unaffected by hardships because of their queer orientation, or he must turn his hardships into the opposite, a fetish, a sob story that others would enjoy. *A Single Man* is an attempt to depict a man privately trying to mourn the loss of his lover, after his public performances of mourning have gone to these two extremes that disgust him. The novel is filled with such scenes of gay intimacy that George reminisces about:

Think of two people, living together day after day, year after year, in this small space, standing elbow to elbow cooking at the same small stove, squeezing past each other on the narrow stairs, shaving in front of the same small bathroom mirror, constantly jogging, jostling, bumping against each other's bodies by mistake or on purpose, sensually,

aggressively, awkwardly, impatiently, in rage or in love—think what deep though
invisible tracks they must leave, everywhere, behind them! (Isherwood 3-4)

George's mourning, in effect, is so private and domesticated, it can only take place on the stage of their shared home. It is a home of "two people," not two men, rendered non gendered in this way, at the same time as it betrays its queerness: "shaving in front of the same small bathroom mirror". George's unhappiness is only truly recognized in this space, where there is no one to fetishize it (but the reader). Each morning, walking down the overly small staircase, a track where he used to squeeze past Jim, "he stops short and knows, with a sick newness, almost as though it were for the first time: Jim is dead. Is dead." (4). This loss is "too painful to be treated sentimentally" (4), he thinks, and after a moment truly feeling his unhappiness, he must move on, must pretend nothing happened, to avoid the fetishism at all costs.

In this manner, Jim's absence is evermore present in *A Single Man* by his inability to ever be truly dead; in maintaining the facade that Jim is still living elsewhere in order to avoid fetishism, George must repeatedly experience losing Jim. Further, Jim's death constitutes a sort of "non-event"—what Celia Kitzinger calls the "silences, absences, [and] evasions" caused by homophobia and antiqueer politics, moments when one must "choose to stay silent and invisible" (7) in order to live a bearable life. Jim's death is a non-event for George both because he refuses to make it into an event for his neighbors and "friends," who are in a hurry to fetishize any queer unhappiness, but also because George cannot even attend the event that would solidify his loss: Jim's funeral. The accumulation of these non-events in the face of the fetishization of queer loss constitutes the tragedy of Isherwood's *A Single Man*.

At the same time, Jim's death can be said to "do away with that which is already gone" (Stanley, "Near Life" 9); what Eric Stanley calls the overkill of queer lives. It is not enough for

Jim to die, leaving George alone and unhappy—George must also be forced to constantly bear that loss again and again when his neighbors or coworkers ask him about how Jim is doing. Jim, in effect, is killed over and over in the text, constituting a violence against queer bodies and queer psyches that in turn can never be acknowledged itself. In this manner, while Jim is made into nothingness, into the “unspeakable,” he cannot entirely be done away with for George specifically. Further, Jim is “done away with” as someone who is “already gone” in so far as many would not even acknowledge how important he was to George’s life in the first place, even if they knew he was dead. When fetishization replaces recognition (or masquerades *as* recognition), these tragic “non-event” over determine queer lives, and coerce queer individuals to disavow their own unhappiness.

George elaborates further on the hatred he feels for the homophobic masses that have made his grief unbearable (in that his body cannot “bear” the grief if he is to resist the fetishization of his gay tragedy) in a passionate speech he gives to his students:

And I’ll tell you something else. A minority has its own kind of aggression. It absolutely dares the majority to attack it. It hates the majority—not without a cause, I grant you. [...] And the more they all hate, and the more they’re all persecuted, the nastier they become! Do you think it makes people nasty to be loved? You know it doesn’t! Then why would it make them nice to be loathed? While you’re persecuted, you hate what’s happening to you, you hate the people who are making it happen; you’re in a world of hate. Why, you wouldn’t recognize love if you met it! You’d suspect love! You’d think there was something behind it - some motive - some trick. (Isherwood 54)

One might add: Do you think it makes people happy to be constantly depicted as miserable? Or for their unhappiness to be *enjoyed* by others? Thus, in this speech where “George no longer

knows what he has proved or disproved, whose side, if any, he is arguing on" (54), George gets at the core of his pain and unhappiness: it is not only that others will not and cannot recognize his love for what it was, and recognize his grief without fetishizing it, but also that George himself "wouldn't recognize love" if it was staring him in the face. The world that has made him have to hide away his unhappiness and pretend that he is fully functional, "normal," and happy, has also inhibited his capacity to love and feel loved in the first place. That is George's true tragedy, not the stereotypical "Bury Your Gays" trope of the premature death of his partner.

Ironically, criticism of Isherwood's *A Single Man* has largely left out the fetishization of queer unhappiness that undergirds much of George's inner turmoil in the novel. Many critics, such as Alan Wilde, have argued that George is a "type of everyman," (Wilde 128) "a mirror of the common fate [of death and loss]" (138), in sum, a representation of the human condition, and in so doing have dismissed George's minority status. In other words, these critics have failed to recognize the particularity of George's love, glossed it over, finding themselves guilty of disavowing George's loss too. Some critics, such as Sybille Bedford, for instance, have gone so far as to write that George's homosexuality is "the book's main artistic flaw" as "it impairs what might have been the august universality of the theme" (qtd. in Finney 253).

In truth, Bedford and Wilde have ignored a central aspect of the novel (perhaps, even *the* central aspect): George is not an everyman, he is quite literally a single man. A queer man made single by a world that cannot recognize his love, his grief, and has even made him doubt his own capacity to love and feel loved. As Reed Woodhouse has argued, "What is necessary, as George saw [by the end of the novel], is to insist that the monstrous be acknowledged, not wished away or exaggerated" (10), the monstrous here being homosexuality as seen by the heterosexual majority. Readers like Sybille Bedford *wish away* George's homosexuality, which is after all,

“the characteristic that most pervasively defines his life” (Summers 203), in order to make George a universal character.

If I belabor this criticism of Christopher Isherwood’s novel so much, it is because it is startling that a novel that so blatantly comments on the fetishization of queer unhappiness could be misread as being about a generalized, normalized grief—a grief that everyone can share. In truth, this “generalizing” reaction to queer unhappiness is frequent in contemporary culture. It finds its roots in the same soil that fetishism grows out from: the motion of making queer unhappiness your own (as a heterosexual, or even a queer person privileged enough to be happy⁷). Fetishism appropriates queer unhappiness by turning it into heterosexual happiness, the “enjoy[ing] being sad about” queer tragedies. Conversely, turning queer tragedies into more commonplace tragedies appropriates queer unhappiness by claiming: “I, a privileged individual, share your unhappiness too. We are not that different after all!” Both impulses disavow queer unhappiness in their own way, and in turn, uphold the structures of power that render queer unhappiness so commonplace.

The Quintessential Gay Tragedy

“The most selfish part of me is happy about this disease. Because I know until they cure it, you won’t leave me.” (Makkai 45)

If the fetishization and appropriation of queer tragedies via generalization were so visible in Isherwood’s cultural commentary as early as 1965, they only penetrated contemporary culture

⁷ See Chapter 3: Normative Queer Un(Happiness) for more clarification of what I mean here.

further with the endless tragedies of the HIV/AIDS epidemic—which has been described as “a spectacle of suffering and death” (Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave?* 4). The HIV/AIDS epidemic in effect instantiated the trope of the queer who cannot help but be unhappy, making it seem as if queer people, judged as morally bad for being unhappy, were getting what they deserve. Gay men in particular have long embodied a free, easy-going lifestyle, full of sex, alcohol, and drugs, a lifestyle that has been fetishized by heterosexuals, particularly by heterosexual women who want gay best friends, “because they’re so fun”. The HIV/AIDS crisis was often interpreted as a rightful punishment for this sinful lifestyle, as a “punishment [...] not just for individuals but of a group” (Sontag 54), in a sense, for being too “gay” (as in the etymological roots of the word meaning “happy”—having too much “fun”). The argument goes: with “the male homosexual subculture [of] recreational, risk-free sexuality” (Sontag 77), the homosexual lifestyle “contains by definition the seeds of its own destruction” (67). It is notable, then, that the unhappiness caused by HIV/AIDS has long been “disallowed” (Schulman 46); “the meaning of [this] loss is not considered” nor are the countless deaths “computed” (46). If gay men were deserving of this punishment for living too happy lifestyles, their suffering must also not be acknowledged, lest it becomes legitimized. Queer unhappiness is thereby rarely acknowledged, and when it is, it is often fetishized. This fetishization, of course, does not actually constitute a form of recognition.

The depiction of queer people, and gay men in particular, as promiscuous and as having “more fun” than their heterosexual counterparts has been a source of entertainment in mainstream media for a long time. If, however, HIV/AIDS is seen as the “punishment” for such “reckless” behaviour (or the death of the gay villains, as is the case in our discussion of *The White Lotus*), deriving enjoyment from this drama is more problematic. Happiness, in this manner, might be less about what queer people have (if promiscuity and partying can be called

happiness) and more about what they do for heterosexuals; as with the example of *The White Lotus*, and with *Modern Family* in the next chapter—heterosexual audiences enjoy depictions of gay men having fun—it makes them happy—yet they also derive some form of enjoyment from the tragic “consequences” of these actions dramatized in fetishistic HIV/AIDS narratives.

Thus, I argue that mainstream culture moralizes happiness/unhappiness in circulatory ways. In effect, the dominant ideology’s reading of queer people as unhappy is self-referential, citing its depictions of queers as unhappy to prove itself “correct”. The tragedies of the HIV/AIDS epidemic were a perfect stage on which to further depict queer people as “bad people” deserving of their unhappiness. Against this backdrop, the fetishization of that unhappiness often emerges as a pretense of compassion and sympathy—as a way to say: I do not blame you for what has happened to you, at the same time as it enjoyed the bestowing of this sympathy, and in so doing, enjoyed the unhappiness that was its cause.

It can be argued that the HIV/AIDS narrative has emerged as a distinct narrative “genre,” coalescing into a recognizable cultural form that, more than any other, depicts the depths of queer unhappiness in contemporary culture. The HIV/AIDS epidemic has had an enormous effect on contemporary culture; in her work of critical theory, *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1989), Susan Sontag argues that the epidemic has come to “haunt the collective imagination” (38); it is a “queer past that haunts queers in the present” (Muñoz 88). In effect, HIV/AIDS became mythologized as the “gay disease” (see Sontag 61) or the “gay plague” (Rollyson 39)—a mythologization and haunting that has birthed this new narrative genre.

In turn, it is not surprising that depictions of HIV/AIDS, as a haunting mythology, have been so tragic—after all, the tragic form of the HIV/AIDS narrative follows the “inevitable trajectory” of the illness itself: “you begin healthy and end sick and dead” (Canning and Peck

xxiii). Take for instance, the novel *The Prettiest Star* (2020) by Carter Sickels. The protagonist, Brian, goes home to his parents and sister after his partner “died in the hospital, alone” (Sickels 11) and after learning that he also has AIDS. Brian has been to nine funerals of friends who have died of the virus, and he goes home because his entire network, his chosen family, is now dead. The novel traces the perspectives of his mother, his father, and his sister, as Brian (the last living queer character in the novel) also dies, and their perspectives slowly displace his own, taking over the narrative space of the book left in the wake of his death. Such is the structure of a typical HIV/AIDS narrative. Notably, the final chapter of *The Prettiest Star* is narrated in the second person, putting us, the reader, inside Brian’s dying body, appropriating his illness and his tragedy: “*Brian, Brian, wake up. You pretend you’re still sleeping, this is your favourite part*” (Sickels 272). Sickels’ novel thereby shares the critical impulse to *A Single Man* of generalizing queer unhappiness in order to make it more approachable as a subject.

The advent of HAART (highly active antiretroviral therapy) in the mid 90s completely changed what kind of stories could be told about the illness. As Monica B. Pearl puts it, the narrativization of the HIV/AIDS crisis was “circumscribed in some significant ways by pharmaceuticals” (1); prior to the development of pharmaceutical treatments, narratives about the HIV/AIDS crisis were “novel[s] of death” (Woodhouse 237) which would “constantly return [...] to the same loss in different forms” (236). The HIV/AIDS narrative was centrally structured around a narrative death, a gradual writing out of the narrative of someone who is dying; happiness is very difficult, if impossible, to imagine of in such a context.

After HAART, however, new lifecourses were made available to queers who were sick, and queer happiness became once again possible to imagine. If “at the historical juncture of 1995 (hardly the end of the crisis)” there was already a “precipitous attempt” to put the HIV/AIDS

crisis “already [...] into a historical context” (Pearl 114), it is because queer storytellers wished more than anything to put the inevitable trajectory of the illness, and the inevitable narrative of getting sick and dying miserable and alone, firmly in the past—“the world before protease inhibitors [was] clearly The Past” writes Schulman (qtd. in Canning and Peck xlv), because it *needed to be* in order to move on, and to imagine a queer future in which anything but unhappiness was possible.

It is ironic, then, that the HIV/AIDS narrative has become the primary catalyst for the fetishization of queer unhappiness—although it cannot be said to be surprising: is there no greater tragedy to enjoy than lovers getting terminally sick and dying? Although Isherwood wrote the words at the head of this chapter almost twenty years before the first cases of HIV/AIDS were reported, he might as well have been writing about the virus: “Let us even go so far as to say that this kind of relationship can sometimes be almost beautiful—particularly if one of the parties is already dead; or, better yet, both” (16).

The history of HIV/AIDS has been compared to a “holocaust” by many, including Leo Bersani, who wrote that the Reagan Administration “lock[ed] up homosexuals in quarantine camps” (*Is the Rectum a Grave?* 6) and by not finding the death (or “murder”) of “a gay man with AIDS (or without AIDS?) intolerable or unbearable” resembled the Germans “who never participated in the murder of Jews (and of homosexuals), but who *failed to find the idea of the holocaust unbearable*” (7). In fact, the fetishization of the HIV/AIDS narrative bears many resemblances to the way the Holocaust has been fetishized in contemporary American culture, and reading these two cultural phenomena next to each other can be quite revealing. Just as the HIV/AIDS epidemic “haunt[s] the collective imagination” (Sontag 38), “the Holocaust has

become deeply embedded in the American psyche” (Flanzbaum 7). Such tragedies tend to stick with us, and depictions of them are thereby equipped with incredible cultural force.

The point, however, is not to liken these two tragic histories, but to understand how the unhappiness of minorities has been marketed by the majority, turning tragedies into money printing machines, because sad stories sell. At the same time, fetishizing the unhappiness of minorities goes far beyond just making money—again, it is also a means for the dominating to further root themselves in the dominant position by feigning sympathy, a sympathy that only serves to mask a belief, hidden somewhere deep inside, that those unhappy people are really just *getting what they deserve*. The narrative goes: I get to feel bad about you, and enjoy feeling bad about you, because at least this terrible thing is not happening to me, and in fact, could never happen to me. I do not deserve it.

We now turn to Rebecca Makkai’s novel *The Great Believers* (2018) to explore this concept of market aesthetics and fetishization further. *The Great Believers* was an enormous success: it was a Pulitzer Prize finalist, won several awards for queer literature (despite being written by a heterosexual woman), including the Stonewall Book Award. The Pulitzer committee’s review of the novel speaks for itself:

The Great Believers has become a critically acclaimed, indelible piece of literature; it was selected as one of New York Times Best 10 Books of the Year, a Washington Post Notable Book, a BuzzFeed Book of the Year, a Skimm Reads pick, and a pick for the New York Public Library’s Best Books of the year. (*The Pulitzer Prizes*)

Makkai's novel is part of a revival of fiction about the HIV/AIDS epidemic in recent years, and is by far the most popular novel of this category (even, arguably, the most popular novel ever written about HIV/AIDS)⁸. My point in elaborating at length about how “mainstream” the novel has become is that it is difficult to imagine a book about the HIV/AIDS epidemic achieving this acclaim without deliberately attempting to appeal to the masses—namely, heterosexual readers. If the success of *The Great Believers* is quite remarkable, it is because there is “something unpalatable, impenetrable, hostile, immoral, [and] difficult” (Woodhouse 7) about HIV/AIDS narratives in general. At the same time, I would like to suggest that Makkai's novel was successful precisely *because* HIV/AIDS narratives have such unattractive qualities. After all, these qualities allow for the fetishization of the work.

The Great Believers alternates between two narrative accounts: Yale, a gay man whose narrative begins in 1985 and ends in 1992 with his death from AIDS, and Fiona, whose brother dies of AIDS and who takes care of Yale and his friends when they get sick. The novel is principally about how chosen families are formed in the wake of tragedies—Fiona has “two hundred big brothers” (Makkai 10) she says, speaking of “the family [one] choose[s]” (261) rather than the family they were born into. Fiona never forgives her parents for kicking out her brother Nico, who becomes sick with AIDS after becoming homeless: “They had done this to Nico, her mother and father” (Makkai 187). As every member of that queer family gradually gets sick and dies throughout the novel, only Fiona, a straight woman, is left to inherit this history of unhappiness. She emerges as a sort of adoptive witness of queer struggle and unhappiness in this chosen family.

⁸ One novel that could be argued to have been more widely read, Cunningham's *The Hours*, which was previously discussed, only deals with HIV/AIDS tangentially, not rendering it a “novel about HIV/AIDS” like *The Great Believers*.

The novel opens with the funeral of Nico, Fiona's brother, after which we visit the deathbeds of Terrence, Katsu, Charlie, and finally Yale, the second narrator of the novel. In the last chapter from Yale's point of view, he wonders what it would be like to be "the last gay man [to] die" (507), cementing his role as the final queer inheritor of this chosen family. Additionally, this brings us back to the overkill of queer lives, the "doing away with that which is already gone" (Stanley 9) by way of imagining the death of *all* gay men after so many have already died in the novel. In the end, only Fiona remains, whose account ties up the death of the network by narrating the aftermath of Yale's death for us and commemorating all of the dead in the final chapters. In this sense, *The Great Believers* does not hesitate to sensationally perpetuate the "Bury Your Gays" trope.

Makkai's novel is greatly preoccupied with what it means to witness and inherit traumatic histories, perhaps betraying Makkai's own concern with her appropriation of the queer tragedy of the HIV/AIDS crisis. Twice in the novel Makkai thinks about queer inheritance specifically: Charlie jokes "blessed be the dykes [...] for they shall inherit all our shit" (153), and Yale later imagines "the next generation of baby gays, when we're all gone" (331) and how they will remember them. While Fiona, the straight ally, the adoptive witness, is a reliable inheritor of this traumatic history, Charlie and Yale express a concern for a specifically queer remembrance of their suffering. At the end of the novel, the only queer character who has not gotten sick and died of AIDS is Julian, who expresses how worn out he is by these endless tragedies while reflecting on William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: "What a burden. To be Horatio. To be the one with the memory. And what's Horatio supposed to do with it?" (Makkai 512). A queer remembrance of queer trauma, then, emerges as an impossibility—in the first place because Makkai has killed

off all her queer characters, and, in turn, completely worn out the only surviving one with this burden of having cared for all his dying friends.

If Fiona emerges as “the primary keeper of [...] memory” (386) for this queer family, she does so as a proxy both for Makkai, as a heterosexual author, and for the majority of readers as well. In effect, Fiona’s narration translates the queer pain in the novel for a mainstream audience, taking everything that is “unpalatable, impenetrable, hostile, immoral, and difficult” and turning it into something that is attractive to read. While Fiona has a right to bear this burden, as, after all, it is her family that has died, it is dubious whether the same can be said about Makkai’s appropriation of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. *The Great Believers*, with the death of all but one of the queer characters, seems to suggest that if there are no queer survivors remaining to remember this history, a heterosexual remembrance is justified—in effect, attempting to justify the fetishization of queer unhappiness in the novel, by killing off all but one of the gay characters.

This raises the broader question: If one is to keep the memory of the HIV/AIDS crisis alive, must one then also allow a heterosexual appropriation of that memory? After all, with “queer cultural incorporation” (Wiegman 15) and the possibility for queer happiness that goes with that incorporation, there have been concerns about “the effacements of the [queer] past” (15). If queer people will not write about queer history, must heterosexuals do so in their stead? In general, as Julian’s reference to Horatio’s burden suggests in *The Great Believers*, there has been a hesitation for queer authors “to respond to AIDS within fiction” (Pearl 5), as the actual history of what happened “was quite enough; there was no need to make [more of] it up” (5). In fact, many of the aforementioned novels of this emerging genre that revisit the HIV/AIDS epidemic are narrated by heterosexuals and feature non-queer protagonists. These novels self-

reflexively consider the affordances of including heterosexual perspectives in their narratives in order to appeal to a wider, heterosexual audience.⁹

To her credit, Makkai explores the issue of appropriation at length in the novel, with one specific character, Richard, acting as a metafictional proxy for the work done by *The Great Believers* itself. Richard is an artist who documents the HIV/AIDS crisis with photographs, “layering [the] old and new” (509), just as *The Great Believers* layers Yale’s narration from the 1980s with Fiona’s retrospective set in 2015. Richard has edited his exposition “with a contemporary eye, but the subject is twenty-five, thirty years ago” (141)—in fact, his editing has also been for a heterosexual audience, as all but one of the characters who attend his exhibition at the end of the novel are straight. Makkai is self-reflexively thinking about her own editing of the history of the HIV/AIDS epidemic here, both in terms of making the story relevant and interesting to a contemporary audience, but also to a heterosexual one.

Having established at length how *The Great Believers* self-consciously appropriates queer unhappiness, I would like to explore how that appropriation can be characterized as fetishistic. *The Great Believers* does not offer “‘cleaned-up’ versions of the past as substitutes for more challenging memories of social struggle” (Castiglia and Reed 2)—instead, it depicts the raw unattractive struggle of HIV/AIDS tragedies. While there is a “romantic carefree version of the story” (Makkai 139) suggested in the novel, Makkai veers away from it. At the same time, that is not to say that Makkai does not romanticize the unattractive tragic struggle with illness. In other words, while Makkai does not “clean up” her historicization of the HIV/AIDS crisis, she does turn it into an entertaining story at the expense of her queer characters.

⁹ See Gagnon, “‘A Chain of Transmission from the Past’: Transmission of HIV/AIDS in Multigenerational Historical Fiction”

The novel opens with a memorial for Nico, Fiona's brother. Makkai problematically attempts to depict this memorial in an overly complex way: "This isn't a funeral, it's a *party*" (6). While Yale has "been cultivating numbness all day," feeling conflicted about "this idea of *party* [...] this imperative to be, somehow, okay. Merry," (4) his other gay friends rummage through Nico's possessions, finding sex drugs, wondering if they should use them: "There's absolutely no point to doing poppers at a memorial [...] but this isn't a funeral" (6). "There's death out there, but we're gonna have a fabulous time in here" (6), another character states. While, again, this memorial for a man who was kicked out of his home by his parents, rendered homeless, got HIV and died is in no way a carefree cleaned-up story, Makkai cannot help but romanticize it—the homosexual characters cannot only feel sad, they must also celebrate this death, in an overly perverse, stereotypically sexualized way. Makkai returns to this hypersexualized gay stereotype later in the novel, once again trying to complicate it, and, I would suggest, failing once again. Yale goes to a gay disco, "a space where everyone was so happy," feeling "entitled to joy" despite also knowing "that any happiness was somehow stolen" (43). Of course, Yale is allowed to be happy, even if his gay friends are dying one by one of AIDS, but to feel "entitled" to it, as if that happiness were a privilege for Makkai to bestow? Despite knowing that she might have "gotten the details wrong" (Makkai, "Author's Note" 519), Makkai confidently depicts such delicate scenes of gay moralizing without much concern with the stereotypes she might be perpetuating.

Soon after, Charlie, Yale's boyfriend, tells him that "the most selfish part of me is happy about this disease. Because I know until they cure it, you won't leave me" (45). Here, while Makkai demonstrates an awareness of how messed up that logic is, and Yale "can't believe [Charlie] said that out loud" (45), the fact that she would even write such a phrase, in which a

gay character is “*happy* about this disease” (emphasis added), demonstrates a romanticising of the illness that cannot be ignored—HIV is mobilized to reinforce a romanticised monogamy and the heteronormative institution of the couple form. Such a distortion of the true nature of queer happiness/unhappiness in the face of the atrocities of HIV/AIDS is what I mean by the fetishization of queer affect. All of Charlie’s friends are dying of AIDS at this point; how could he be *happy* about this¹⁰, unless, of course, you are trying to justify the enjoyment you derive from this history of pain and unhappiness? Not only is Makkai perpetuating harmful stereotypes here, but she is also almost justifying queer suffering, as if “what Charlie was doing was suicide” (355) as he is happy for what is killing his kind, and eventually, him. Accordingly, the scene resolves with Yale and Charlie kissing, assuring one another of being faithful to each other. Such scenes are an obvious way for Makkai to equip this tragic narrative with shock value, but also make it troublingly romantic in such a way that heterosexual audiences would appreciate.

Queer characters making such statements about what makes them happy, as voiced by a heterosexual author, is particularly conspicuous. However, Makkai quite insidiously also romanticizes HIV/AIDS through the narration of Fiona, the straight ally character. Fiona is “madly in love with Yale” (211), rendering this intimacy between two friends who became close after experiencing so much suffering together, losing countless friends to the virus, into something merely romantic. Effectively, Makkai pushes aside the other forms of intimacy she has worked so hard to depict by making Fiona “madly in love” with her dying friend. Further, Fiona is equipped with a savior complex, feeling “like some horrible Hindu god, turning all she touched to ash” (229):

¹⁰ I really stress the word *happy* here because that is Makkai’s chosen diction, and it relates directly to the discussion of (un)happiness in this work; Charlie does not say that he is “thankful” or “relieved,” but that he is “happy about this disease [HIV]”.

She had so much guilt about so many of them—the ones she wished she'd talked into getting tested sooner, the ones she might have gone back in time to keep from going out on a particular night [...] the ones she might have done more for when they got sick. The night that, for no reason, she'd told Charlie Keene that Yale was with Teddy. Why on earth had she done that? It was an honest, drunken mistake but everyone knew what Freud said about mistakes [...] (229)

Some of Fiona's guilt here is misguided, as it was never her job in the first place to save these people, nor is it the reader's. At the same time, her guilt about Charlie and Yale is justified; because of her love for Yale, Makkai suggests, Fiona lies to Yale's boyfriend Charlie that Yale is cheating on him, prompting Charlie to be reckless, and get sick. Equating her guilt for perhaps being the cause of Charlie's eventual death and her guilt for not being able to be the savior for these dying gays is problematic in its own way—most importantly, it reminds us of Fiona's privileged position as a heterosexual, and the manner in which she has control over her life in ways that none of the other queer characters in the novel possess. In the end, by intervening in the story in the way that she did, without a complete understanding of what it felt like for her gay friends, Fiona has effectively just made things worse, particularly for Charlie and Yale.

Makkai further fetishizes this relationship between Fiona and queer unhappiness in *The Great Believers* by having Fiona consider it “one of her great moral failings that, deep down, she didn't care on quite the same visceral level about the ongoing AIDS crisis in Africa” (426). Here, again, the pretense that her “caring” matters *so much* surfaces as a performance of heterosexual guilt for the readers to identify with. In sum, Makkai's problematic depictions of the HIV/AIDS epidemic make it seem as if many of the queer characters are not only incapable of helping themselves, but they are also intentionally hurting themselves. This has the effect of reproducing

the very relations of power that Fiona (and by extension, Makkai) purports to be trying to defy in the novel—the relations of power that are in effect responsible for the suffering of all these queer characters.

Finally, one particular scene in *The Great Believers* reminds one of Mrs Strunk's fetishization of queer unhappiness in *A Single Man*. While talking about a heterosexual love affair that happened long ago, Yale and his intern Roman (who eventually infects Yale with HIV) have a quite illuminating discussion:

Yale shrugged. "I mean, I don't feel like this story has a happy ending."

"It's so beautiful," Roman said. "Doomed love."

Yale laughed. "Is it?" And then he couldn't stop laughing. Which was terrible, because [...] Roman looked hurt. But the moony expression on Roman's face, his voice, had hit the darkest spot of Yale's humor. How beautiful, the doomed love! How gorgeous and ambient, the ways we abandon each other! The lovely wars we die in, the poetry of disease! He wanted to be able to call Terrence up, to say, "You were like Romeo and Juliet! Romeo and Juliet die puking their guts out. Tristand and Iseult at ninety pounds with no hair. It's beautiful, Terrence. It's beautiful!" (Makkai 300)

While there is clear irony in this romanticization of tragedy, Yale's dark humor evolves when it passes from being about a heterosexual doomed love to a queer one. Once again, while Makkai is careful in rendering her depictions complex enough to avoid lazily reifying major stereotypes, it is unclear exactly *what* she is trying to achieve with this irony—particularly because she does indeed romanticize doomed love in other instances in the novel. In this sense, *The Great Believers* risks constituting "a potent form of forgetting even as [it] purport[s] to traffic in memory" (Castiglia and Reed 2), as its fetishism and romanticizing distort its subject matter,

often overshadowing the queer perspective with Fonia's indecisive, more problematic—but perhaps more “relatable”—heterosexual perspective.

In conclusion, many narratives about the HIV/AIDS crisis today appeal to heterosexual readers, principally by including heterosexual narrators and protagonists into the stories. These narrative voices often involve the fetishization of queer tragic unhappiness, rendering this difficult subject matter entertaining. In other words, this fetishization is necessary in order for stories about HIV/AIDS “to be read [or watched], published, and praised” (Woodhouse 28). After all, the “marketability” (Machado Sáez 2) of such tales is crucial: as Reed Woodhouse notes, in response to the reality that “almost none” of the HIV/AIDS novels from the early years are “still in print” (Pearl 4): “I really don’t know who reads [AIDS fiction] for pleasure” (202). Perhaps this fetishization is necessary for this memory to be carried forward. At the same time, one must be reminded of the argument introduced at the start of this chapter: not all recognition is good recognition, and the acknowledgement of queer suffering *only through fetish* does not actually constitute proper recognition.

3: NORMATIVE QUEER HAPPINESS

A Narrative of Assimilation

“A gay elite has hijacked queer struggle in order to position their desires as universal needs, reimagining the dominant signs of straight conformity as the ultimate markers of gay success.” (Sycamore 2)

In 2016, during his pre-candidacy to become president of Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro published a video on Youtube titled “HOMOFOBIA?”, in which he argued:

I have nothing to do with anyone's behavior. If the man and the woman later decide to live with their partner, to form a couple, to live with a same-sex person, go and be happy. But we cannot admit that, by our omission in the Parliament, children become homosexuals in the future, or have such homosexual behavior in the future, by the influence of school. That is inadmissible. (Bolsonaro)

Bolsonaro’s words “Vá ser feliz”—“Go be happy”—illustrate an abjection of queer happiness that is all too frequent in contemporary culture. Bolsonaro expulses the queer, wants to be rid of it as a worry in his political campaign, expressing a desire for queer happiness in so far as the queer is no longer a problem. Be happy elsewhere, somewhere unseen, he is saying. Happiness here is employed as a way to make the queer politically sterile; to neuter a queer agenda that might be at odds with Bolsonaro’s own political agenda. If you are happy, you are not causing trouble, Bolsonaro seems to suggest. Happiness is a “reward” you get for being a happy gay who just goes away.

This “Go be happy” prompts two questions. First: Is portraying the various possibilities and configurations of queer families in contemporary media a means to move beyond the

simplistic fetishization of queer unhappiness, by depicting queer families that are happy “just like heterosexuals” (in a way heterosexuals can identify as happiness because it approximates heterosexuals sources of happiness) or, is it selling out to heteronormative ideals of happiness? The family, after all, is the nexus of the heteronormative model of happiness; it is the mothership of heterosexual institutions; it is, in other words, a social form that is “already attributed as [a] happiness-cause,” alongside other hegemonic forms such as “marriage, class mobility, [and] whiteness” (Ahmed 112).

In other words, is it only possible to conceive of a queer happiness that “approximat[es] the family form” (Ahmed 114), a form which is, by its very nature, inherently heteronormative? Do no other pathways to happiness exist for queer people? Ahmed is very critical of queer happiness achieved by imitating happy heterosexuality; that is not to say that she believes “happy homonormativity” (114) to be entirely unattractive. Instead, she argues that is quite a “bleak vision” (114) for queer people if the only legitimate path to happiness is to imitate heterosexual ideals. In fact, Ahmed goes as far as to claim that “to be happily queer can be to recognize the unhappiness that is concealed by the promotion of happy normativity” (117). In other words, quite paradoxically, becoming happily queer might come from embracing unhappiness; it is in this respect that Ahmed seems to borrow most from the antisocial thesis in queer theory, particularly Lee Edelman’s call for the embracing of negative role relinquished to queers.

Of course, there exists alternative forms of queer happiness that do not approximate the heterosexual family form. In thinking about the “history of HIV” (“Paranoid” 1), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has articulated that through shared hardships and suffering, a different form of queer intimacy can emerge—an intimacy that, although often unrecognized by heterosexuals, has its own affordances:

But isn't it a feature of queer possibility—only a contingent feature, but a real one, and one that in turn strengthens the force of contingency itself—that our generational relations don't always proceed in this lockstep? [...] What it means to identify with each other must also be very different. On this scene, an older person doesn't love a younger as someone who will someday be where she now is, or vice versa. No one is, so to speak, carrying forward the family name; there's a sense in which our life narratives will barely overlap. There's another sense in which they slide up more intimately alongside one another than can any lives that are moving forward according to the regular schedule of the generations. It is one another immediately, one another as the present fullness of a becoming whose arc may extend no further, whom we each must learn best to apprehend, fulfill, and bear company. (26-27)

Sedgwick celebrates families that share no family name, that escape the genealogical fantasy of the heteronormative family. She articulates a queer critique of the Church of the Future long before Edelman's writings about the Futurch, and more importantly, her critique aims to be reparative rather than simply deconstructive.

Bolsonaro's abjection of happiness prompts a second question: is queer happiness a sterilising agent for social justice? While happiness is perhaps not at odds with "the anger, flamboyance, and subversion once thriving in gay subcultures" (Sycamore 3), one of the most visible forms of queer happiness is "a narrative of assimilation" (Ahmed 112), enabled by a "sanitized, straight-friendly version of gay identity" (Sycamore 1). This happiness is made possible by "assimilationist norms" (1); it opts for a happy apoliticism over an unhappy activism.

Turning now to our first case study: the popular sitcom *Modern Family*, which aired from 2009 to 2020, and featured a gay couple, Mitchell and Cameron, as main characters. It was certainly one of the first, and one of the most popular, prime time television shows to depict a happy same sex couple in such central roles. As Jude Dry explains, *Modern Family* “was the first time a major network had shown a long-term, committed queer relationship—and with two of its leading characters”. The words “long-term” and “committed” here are to be emphasized, as part of what made Mitch and Cam palatable for mainstream television is that they “approximat[e] the [heteronormative] family form” (Ahmed 114) in order to attain happiness. The first episode of the show introduces us to the characters as they adopt a daughter, and the two get married soon after gay marriage is legalized. In other words, if *Modern Family* depicts these gay characters so unapologetically happy, it is because they are so otherwise “normal,” in effect neutralizing their queerness by making them “go be happy.”

As the actor who plays Mitchell, Jesse Tyler Ferguson, has said about his role in the show:

I think that putting a gay couple in the forefront, and meeting them when they’re at this moment in time when they’re becoming new parents for the first time, it’s something that’s incredibly relatable to so many people, gay and straight and non-binary. I think it was revolutionary back then, and I don’t think it’s as revolutionary now, which I think is a great thing. (qtd. in Easton)

Thus, *Modern Family* can be credited with portraying a queer family in a positive light, as Mitch and Cam are quite revolutionarily happy in their loving relationship and in their raising of their daughter. For a wide viewership to see a queer family being fairly “relatabl[y]” happy certainly helped cement queer happiness as a possibility in popular consciousness. Anecdotally, *Modern*

Family was the first time that I was personally exposed to a gay couple on television who had a healthy, committed relationship, and the show certainly played a role in my conception of the futures available to me as a gay man.

In turn, it can be said that *Modern Family* helped pave the way for more of such representations of gay families, as Ferguson suggests with his “I don’t think it’s as revolutionary now”. The way in which representation begets representation, resulting in memetic effects, is important to note here. Thus, *Modern Family*’s influence cannot be overstated as Megan Townsend from GLAAD (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) suggests:

The series has consistently brought in millions of viewers every week for the past 11 years, and let viewers—particularly ones who may not have been tuning into other inclusive series on cable or streaming—get to know and love a gay couple in all their ups and downs and trials and tribulations. (qtd. in Dry)

To add to that, a 2012 poll “found that 27 percent of likely voters said that depictions of gay characters on TV made them more pro-gay marriage, and there are news accounts of people crediting their newfound sympathy toward gay people to *Modern Family*” (Kornhaber).

Having established the many positives of *Modern Family*’s depiction of gay characters, we can turn to the issues inherent in Mitch and Cam’s normalized happiness. The couple is representative of a gay happiness achieved through assimilation; they depict a fairly streamlined (that is, privileged) experience of “gay marriage and gay parenting” alongside the “antisepticizing of gay sex” (Caserio 819). In stark contrast with *HTGAWM*, gay sex in *Modern Family* is referred to very sparsely, mostly via innuendos. Of all the couples in the show, Mitch and Cam’s relationship is certainly the least sexual, as if the producers knew that such scenes would make their viewers uncomfortable. As Spencer Kornhaber has argued in an article in *The*

Atlantic, “Cam and Mitch have been about as tame as anyone could ask—in contrast to the straight couples they hang out with, they rarely touch, never talk about sex, and make a big deal over kissing in public.” As the series progresses, however, there are more attempts to depict the gay couple as sexual beings, as all the adults in the show are portrayed, in an attempt, perhaps, to attain that “veracity” I discussed in chapter one. In many ways, due to “the rage for respectability [...] in gay life today” (Bersani, *Homos* 113), portraying gay life in such a desexualized fashion is not that far-fetched for many normative queer families.

Moving beyond these questions of the market aesthetics of gay sex on mainstream television, what I seek to emphasize in my analysis of *Modern Family* is the way in which the show normalizes normalized gay happiness. In other words, Mitch and Cam’s happiness is not only a promotion of happy normativity, but a promotion of happy normativity that erases the political struggle that was necessary to make that happiness a possibility in the first place. While Mitch and Cam show some (limited) awareness of how privileged they are, they are also politically sterile characters, who contribute to a general “worry over the effacements of the past wrought by queer cultural incorporation” (Wiegman 15).

In other words, one can appreciate that *Modern Family* depicts a gay family as happy, even in spite of the normativity of their happiness. We cannot, however, ignore the many “risks of promoting queer happiness” (Ahmed 106) in this way. After all, “happiness tends to come with rather straight conditions” (100), and for many, it might seem worth giving into those straight conditions. However, naturalizing that happiness by erasing the history of struggle that made it possible is a further instance of the disavowal of queer loss and queer unhappiness we analysed in the previous chapter. In sum, the normalization of normalized queer happiness presupposes an erasure of histories of queer unhappiness—histories of political struggle for the

right to be happy that are still ongoing today. As Ahmed puts it, this entails a form of “being happily queer” that “conceal[s] signs of struggle” (118)—making us wonder: “do happy queer endings have to annul the political force and energy of the unhappy queer?” (114).

In Season 3 episode 13, for instance, Mitch and Cam try to think of an excuse not to go to a wedding, and Cam suggests: “Maybe we just call and say, ‘we’re not going to any more weddings until the gays can get married’” (“Little Bo Bleep” 12:05). Mitch laughs at this, claiming “Oh, so now we’re political? We leave town on gay pride weekend because we don’t like the traffic” (“Little Bo Bleep” 12:08). This is what I mean by the characters being politically sterile; they in effect enact Bolsonaro’s abjection of the political power of queer subversion through queer happiness. While this scene is ironic, in a sense, that does not discount the fact that these characters never really speak about queer politics, or queer history in general. They are only depicted enjoying the benefits of that history of struggle.

Fighting for gay marriage becomes only a convenient excuse for Mitch and Cam, and gay pride is no more than an inconvenience to them. Notably, Mitch demonstrates his awareness of their being apolitical, an awareness that betrays (repressed) guilt derived from a privileged position within queer circles (as middle class white men); the “so *now* we’re political?” reveals a concern with when it is actually appropriate to “become” political, a concern that only privileged individuals have the luxury to enjoy. If Mitch and Cam choose to not revisit this apoliticism, it is because their privileged concern has become not with “the queer struggle for a bearable life,” but about the “aspirational hopes for a good [queer] life” (Ahmed 120).

Similarly, in season 6 episode 22, Mitch and Cam choose to go on a protest against a local burger restaurant that is against gay rights after their gay friends accuse them of not being “that... political” (“Patriot Games” 01:20). While waiting for their friends to start the protest,

Mitch and Cam go into the restaurant to enjoy a burger, as they secretly love the restaurant despite the antigay politics of its owners. Their care for gay politics, again, is just a brief performance out of a sense of shame and guilt. In alluding to queer political struggle and then pushing it aside, *Modern Family* offers nothing more than “‘cleaned-up’ versions of the past as substitutes for more challenging memories of social struggle” (Castiglia and Reed 2). Because after all, why go back to queer struggle when you can enjoy being happy? In sum, Mitch and Cam’s happy hegemonic-ish family is in many ways incompatible with the radical progressive gay agenda that made their happiness a possibility in the first place.

The problem, of course, as I previously alluded to, is that the very motion that allows many gay white men to enjoy the “good queer life,” discounts the same possibility for other less fortunate queer people. *Modern Family* thereby constitutes an example of how “promoting queer happiness might involve promoting social forms in which other queers will not be able to participate” (Ahmed 112). At the same time, there is a notable reading of Mitch and Cam’s happiness as performative (albeit the gap between authenticity and performativity is arguable, as it does not mean that something is performed that it is not in some sense *real*).

As I previously argued, normative gay happiness might not be that much about what gay couples actually experience (although I would not argue that Mitch and Cam are secretly unhappy either), but what they do to others—specifically, the happiness they give to heterosexual audiences both real and fictitious. If “TV has convinced America that same-sex couples can be just like straight ones” (Kornhaber), because they can derive happiness from the same sources, namely, through “increasing proximity to social forms that are already attributed as happiness-causes (the family, marriage, class mobility, whiteness)” (Ahmed 112)—seeing a gay couple happy “just like you” not only fortifies and naturalizes normative happiness-causes,

but also affectively liberates heterosexual audiences from any guilt associated with their anti-queer politics: Gay people are happy! What more can they ask for?

As Ahmed has argued, the outward display of happiness can render one invisible: “I am not fine, like you, my life is about maintaining the appearance of being fine, an appearance which is also a disappearance” (76). For gay men, performing light-heartedness and happiness can be a way to render invisible their difference. Appearing happy is labor intensive, however; it wears one out, and that fatigue in turn erases the political implications of the underlying queer unhappiness. Homosexual men in particular are pushed towards a moralized code of conduct “premised on making other people happy” (Ahmed 252). Scenes of Mitch and Cam putting on this front of being “fun” are a recurring trope in *Modern Family*. In season 6 episode 10 they say “We’re like catnip to drunken bachelorette party girls” (“Haley’s 21st Birthday” 01:40), demonstrating an internalization of this role of gay performers who entertain heterosexuals with their gayness. I am reminded here of the aforementioned quotations from *The White Lotus*: “If you’re looking for a friend, gay guys are really the best. Because, let’s face it, women are kinda... depressing,” and “These gay guys are fun!”. Entertaining heterosexuals, which is the goal of *Modern Family* more broadly, means concealing signs of struggle, and is thereby incompatible with the “subversion once thriving in gay subcultures” (Sycamore 3). Mitch and Cam, in effect, are not part of a gay subculture, as they have been assimilated into mass culture or, more appropriately, the passivity of the culture industry.

In *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed makes a central argument about queer happy normativity; one can be queer and happy with full knowledge of “the unhappiness that is concealed by the promotion of happy normativity” (Ahmed 117). Ahmed does not elaborate on the meaning of this “concealed”. Mitch and Cam in *Modern Family* reveal both inflections of the

term: either the gay couple is concealing an inside unhappiness, or at least, put on a performance of happiness that is greater than what they actually feel. At the same time, their privileged happy normativity also conceals other queer unhappiness by way of pushing it out of the limelight. In doing so, this gay couple implicitly draws agency and happiness from the very social injustices they claim to stand opposed to. In turn, by seeing Mitch and Cam happy on television, viewers might assume the same happiness is available to all queer people, which it is, of course, not.

Happy Endings

“It is important not to hand over futurity to normative white reproductive futurity.”

(Muñoz 95)

CBC’s sitcom *Schitt’s Creek* (2015-2020), which aired alongside *Modern Family* for several years, presents queer (un)happiness in a more nuanced way, yet the resolution of the series regresses into another iteration of normative queer happiness through the adoption of social forms that are always already attributed as happiness-causes (family, marriage, class mobility, whiteness) (Ahmed 112). David, one of the four main characters in the show, is a pansexual white man whose relationships have been unhealthy and unfulfilling, much in the same way as characterized in our previous discussions of *How to Get Away with Murder*. Later, David meets Patrick, and they fall in love; the final episode, quite notably titled “Happy Ending,” neatly (perhaps too neatly) ties up the series with the same sex couple getting married.

Schitt’s Creek is a very pertinent television show as it is a direct response to the tropes explored in chapter one of this thesis; Dan Levy, the creator of the show, who also plays David, has said:

As a gay person writing a gay relationship on TV, I was so tired of watching characters get torn apart by circumstance, or their own histories, or all of the terrible and very real realities that exist within the community. I just wanted a love story that lasted. (qtd. in Linnell)

The “Happy Ending” of the show, which constitutes a fairly normative queer happy ending, was thereby something that the show was funnelled towards from the very beginning, even if David spent much of the show trying to find happiness elsewhere. The finale of *Schitt's Creek* evokes how commonplace depictions of queer unhappiness can be, reminding the viewer of the role of queer unhappiness as the (intentionally invisible) catalyst for the show, by having David wake up at the very beginning of the episode from a dream. David asks: “Who died? [...] Did Patrick die? [...] My mind went straight to some kind of unthinkable tragedy. Like something really, really bad happened” followed by the word “Imagine” (“Happy Ending” 00:24), an impulse of sorts for the audience to imagine a different set of circumstances in which *Schitt's Creek* would end in the tired trope of queer tragedy instead of queer happiness. In reality, no such tragedy occurs—there was only a small “hiccup” with David and Patrick’s wedding: there was a storm that forced them to change venues. The gay wedding can still take place, everyone is still alive and happy. How refreshing?

Another conscious choice by the writers of the show was to not “portray homophobia or intolerance on [the] show” (Linnell); Levy has further argued:

We learn by what we watch. [...] If you take the hate out, [...] if you take [out] the rules that are dictating who you can love, how you can love them, what kind of people are good people, what kind of people are bad people, you're only left with joy, which can only have an enlightening effect on whoever's watching it. (qtd. in Connolly)

In this manner, *Schitt's Creek* is clearly after a certain affect; it seeks to make audiences feel happy about happiness, and particularly, to feel happy about queer happiness. Levy's note about "bad people" and "good people" is particularly interesting in response to Sara Ahmed's work on the moralization of unhappy/happy people. If queer people are made to be happy in the show, and made to be happy in a certain way that would make "whoever's watching it" feel "enlighten[ed]," queer people are depicted as "good people". In effect, by "giv[ing] happiness to its characters *as* queers," *Schitt's Creek* is "readable as making queers appear 'good'" (Ahmed 88).

While the same could be said about Mitch and Cam in *Modern Family*, I stress this point for *Schitt's Creek* because David and Patrick's lack of "being" political is quite different from Mitch and Cam's apoliticism. Homophobia and antiqueer politics are a frequent trope in *Modern Family*, and while Mitch and Cam make an effort to change the views of their close family, their political agenda ends there. In contrast, Levy's intention to have no homophobia *at all* in *Schitt's Creek* was a success—while David's insecurities and Patrick's coming out story betray the effects of homophobia, they are never once met with any intolerance due to their sexual orientation. If they are apolitical, then, it is not because they refuse to be political; instead, injustices that would require them to speak out simply never arise. In turn, however, it can be said that David and Patrick, just like Mitch and Cam, as white queer men of a certain socioeconomic background, growing up in North America, are quite privileged. The characters in *Schitt's Creek* can be said to be particularly privileged; who, in reality, even in this day and age, gets to live their adult lives without any intolerance?

This is the sense in which *Schitt's Creek* can be argued to constitute a queer utopia along the lines of what Muñoz imagined: Levy's show does not "too easily snap into the basically

reactionary posture” of lazily denouncing antiqueer politics and leaving it there, much in the way *Modern Family* does (Muñoz 826). *Schitt's Creek* is in the least bit reactionary, spending its energy instead on imagining a queer futurity where collectivity comes first, embracing Muñoz’s provocative thesis that “queerness is primarily about futurity” (825).

Importantly, however, Muñoz queer utopia of the future is certainly not one of “normative white reproductive futurity” (*Cruising Utopia* 95). *Schitt's Creek* falls short in this respect; thus why it comes under the “Normative Queer Happiness” chapter of this thesis. Nevertheless, I argue that *Schitt's Creek* gets it right where *Modern Family* faltered in respect to the (de)politicizing of queer happiness; Levy’s show has the audacity to take happiness all the way, whereas *Modern Family* simply characterized a “straight friendly” version of assimilationist queer happiness that deals with prejudice in a purely reactionary manner, brushing it off lazily. Put differently, whereas *Schitt's Creek* has no antiqueer intolerance whatsoever to brush off, *Modern Family* simply posits that antiqueer intolerance will essentially solve itself without any effort.

It is troubling, then, that *Schitt's Creek*’s audacity stops there. It falls short of depicting other forms of queerness other than gay and pansexual sexual orientations, the couple that are “deserving” of a queer utopia where happy endings are possible are both white men, and the event that constitutes that happy ending is the age-old heterosexual institution of marriage. In other words, just like with *Modern Family*, queer happiness here returns to heteronormative social forms that are already attributed as happiness-causes.

The important question, in the final analysis, is whether this reification of heterosexual institutions and the depiction of privileged white gay men as the only queer individuals “deserving” of happiness renders *Schitt's Creek* a “too-easy narrative” (Woodhouse 32)—is it

nothing more than a story of gay assimilation? And in turn, does this mean that the show sells out its potential political agency for positive change in order to reach mainstream audiences? If it does, would this not mean that *Schitt's Creek* is effectively “sensationaliz[ing] and trivializ[ing]” (Watney 3) its subject matter much in the same way that queer unhappiness is fetishized? Put differently, normalized queer happiness might surface as just another iteration of fetishism, replacing the fetishization of unhappiness with the fetishization of queer happiness. Granting that to be true, the fetishization of queer happiness, as is visible in *Modern Family*, for instance, with homosexual male characters “premised on making other people happy” through their own infectious happiness, becomes nothing more than a means to depoliticize queerness further in order to protect heterosexuality as a privileged social form.

In the end, these questions are essentially an analysis in market aesthetics—choices that were made by the creators of these television shows in order to gain viewers, to be praised, and, in many cases, to make it on television in the first place. While we can never know for certain, I can say with confidence that *Modern Family* and *Schitt's Creek* would not have had the influence they have had today if they did not “tacitly appeal [...] to mainstream values” (Woodhouse 3), namely the heteronormative values of the couple form and of marriage, in the way that they did. Narratives of normative queer happiness, despite their affordances—namely in creating happiness as a *possibility* for queer people in the minds of viewers, some of which are queer and could use that hope—also risk flattering their heterosexual viewers “assuring them that they are in the right, morally or politically or aesthetically” (Woodhouse 7-8) in order for them to stick around. After all, the purpose of television shows is to get people to watch them, not only to be “revolutionary”.

CONCLUSION

Joan Didion begins her book of essays *The White Album* (1979) with these famous words:

We tell ourselves stories in order to live. The princess is caged in the consulate. The man with the candy will lead the children into the sea. [...] We look for the sermon in the suicide, for the social or moral lesson in the murder of five. We interpret what we see, select the most workable of the multiple choices. We live entirely [...] by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the "ideas" with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience. (185)

If we tell ourselves stories in order to live, the stories we tell ourselves and each other about how we *can* live shape *how* we live. In other words, by molding the ways in which we conceive of our possible futures, stories can have an enormous influence on the paths we choose in life—thus, the narratives studied in this work can be said to be “social and political narratives no less than literary or aesthetic ones” (Edelman 135). I posit that the most widely circulated stories in contemporary culture that shape how queer people can live often take three distinct shapes: first, queer characters that are doomed to live unhappy and tragic lives, second, queer characters whose unhappiness is fetishized, and third, privileged queer characters who are rewarded with happiness for approximating “normal” heterosexual lifestyles.

I begin by situating this approach to happiness/unhappiness borrowed from Sara Ahmed within queer theory more broadly—specifically, the way in which the antisocial thesis and queer optimism can be negotiated and read against each other. Ultimately, Ahmed’s approach to happiness/unhappiness can be read as a form of irony, which Donna Haraway has defined as the way in which “contradictions”—namely the pessimist and optimist strains of queer theory—can be read together without “resolv[ing] into large wholes”—a reading that holds “the tension of

[...] incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true" (*Manifestly Haraway* 5). Put differently, both queer unhappiness and queer happiness have their affordances and their downsides; perhaps counterintuitively, stories of queer unhappiness can often be more reparative and politically productive than stories of queer happiness. This presumption "that bad feelings are backward and conservative and good feelings are forward and progressive" (Ahmed, "Happy Objects" 50), which would equate unhappiness with despair and regression, and happiness with repair and hope, can easily lead us astray.

Thus, in approaching the various case studies in this thesis, I have attempted to surface the ways in which depictions of queer happiness and queer unhappiness often demonstrate the same discursive investments in maintaining the status quo, wherein heterosexual behavior is seen as morally good and thereby a cause for happiness, and queer practices are viewed as the inverse. In other words, both forms of portrayals, as "social and political narratives" (Edelman 135), often serve the same purpose, despite depicting queer characters in opposite ways.

I begin by interrogating the way in which the world "reads" queers as unhappy, by repeatedly depicting queer people's lives as violent, and doomed to tragedy. In persistently depicting queer characters as unable to be happy—either because they are unable to feel love (*The White Lotus*), build fulfilling relationships (*HTGAWM*), or escape the clutches of depression (*The Hours*)—such narratives morally judge queer characters as somehow not deserving happiness, particularly because their unhappiness is often deemed to be "caused by" their licentious and violent behaviors. In other words, by usually reserving happy endings for heterosexuals, and in contrast, consistently depicting queer characters as unhappy, heterosexual behavior is shaped and legitimized as the exclusive avenue to happiness. This is strengthened by the fact that most happy queer characters in mainstream contemporary culture also achieve

happiness through approximating heterosexuality. Stories of normative queer happiness depict happiness as the recompense one gets for upholding heterosexuality through citation and repetition; in other words, by making queer happiness about everything *except* queerness.

In turn, the fetishization and romanticization of queer unhappiness effectively transforms queer unhappiness into heterosexual happiness. At the same time, this fetishization feigns “recognition” of the struggles of queer people, preying on the reality that queer unhappiness has long been disavowed. The difficulty, again, is that when recognition has been withheld for so long, any recognition is mistaken for good recognition, and is often thereby too hastily celebrated before being closely scrutinized. Such “recognition” often involves nothing more than the reification of harmful stereotypes. In sum, I argue that “the happiness of the straight world is a form of injustice” (Ahmed 96) when that happiness is derived from queer unhappiness.

In sum, depictions of the inevitability of queer unhappiness and the subsequent fetishization of that unhappiness, as well as portrayals of normative queer happiness, have the effect of reinforcing heterosexuality as morally good, and in turn, queerness as morally bad. As a result, such depictions teach us that queer people who refuse to be assimilated and abide by heterosexist norms deserve being unhappy. In the end, many of the works surfaced in this thesis, despite their reparative intentions, are revealed to be deeply invested in the same moralizing economy of happiness/unhappiness that they denounce.

To conclude, I would like to identify some limitations of this work. To begin with, my focus on “contemporary culture” has been primarily concerned with Anglo-American popular culture. This is in part because the examples broached in this thesis are rooted in a history of personal encounter and personal affect, an approach which could be said to be almost canonical in queer theory, with its particular focus on the importance of representation. Additionally, the

“narratives” I have selected have been predominantly from television or novels, rather than advertising, music videos, or other such mediums. This is because the complexities inherent in longer narratives have been important to my critical inquiry into the nature of queer representation, but again, this choice also harkens back to my history of personal encounter—these are simply some of the depictions of queer (un)happiness that have stuck with me the most.

Moreover, the case studies in this thesis have mostly focused on portrayals of gay males, in part because they constitute the most visible and frequent type of queer depiction. At the same time, such a focus was warranted by the concern with normative queer happiness—as gay males constitute the most “normative” or “easily assimilable” of the queers. Further, the study of fetishization also prompts a focus on gay males, as fetishization often requires its subject matter to be easily identified and equally easily “transformed”. Finally, I am a gay male, and thus, many of the examples that stood out to me in contemporary culture when planning this study were memorable precisely because I could identify myself in them, in part. That being said, it is important for me to clearly disclose that this is in no way an intersectional reading of queer (un)happiness, as my focus has been heavily on narratives of white, cisgendered, and relatively privileged queer individuals. Thus, I firmly believe that further work is necessary to examine how these tropes apply to other queer subgroups, particularly as depictions of queer people in contemporary culture become both more pluralized and diversity becomes more “palatable” for mainstream audiences.

In turn, my focus has been mostly on deconstructing these case studies, reading them against themselves in order to expose underlying contradictions and overlooked reifications. I am aware that little attention has been given to the affordances of these examples; many of the examples found in this thesis, in fact, were chosen because I have cherished and valued them for

a long time. If I have forced myself to be critical of these cultural artefacts here, it is precisely because I am emotionally invested in them as narratives, and thereby I know that they are culturally potent. Most notably, I think *A Single Man* and *The Hours* depict the depths of queer unhappiness in uniquely complex ways, allowing queer readers to authentically recognize themselves in these examples and feel that they are not alone. If these two texts at times verge on being *too depressing*, at the very least they present complexities that are absent from many other more lazy repetitions of the “tragic queer life” trope.

Finally, the two other examples I think hold the most affordances, *Modern Family* and *Schitt's Creek*, are both about normative queer happiness. If I stress the dangers of normative queer happiness so much, it is because it is incredibly attractive for queer people to see other people (more or less) like them depicted as happy. I think these two texts have had an enormously positive influence in contemporary culture, at the same time as I think that it is time for us to move beyond them, to do better, to, as Jesse Tyler Ferguson has said, make them less “revolutionary” by replacing them with more diverse depictions of queer happiness. In other words, in the end, I look forward to the day where the tropes identified in this thesis are no longer culturally relevant because new, more complex, creative, and reparative cultural artefacts have taken their place.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

Television

Game of Thrones. Created by David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, HBO Entertainment, 2011–2019.

House of the Dragon. Created by George R. R. Martin and Ryan Condal, HBO Entertainment, 2022.

How to Get Away with Murder. Created by Peter Nowalk, season 1, ABC Studios, 2014.

Modern Family. Created by Christopher Lloyd and Steven Levitan, 20th Century Fox Television, 2009-2020.

Schitt's Creek. Created by Dan Levy and Eugene Levy, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation / Not a Real Company Productions, 2015-2020.

The White Lotus. Created by Mike White, season 2, HBO Entertainment, 2022.

Fiction

Cunningham, Michael. *The Hours*. Picador, 2002.

Isherwood, Christopher. *A Single Man*. Vintage, 2010.

Makkai, Rebecca. *The Great Believers*. Fleet, 2018.

Sickels, Carter. *The Prettiest Star*. Hub City Press, 2020.

Secondary Sources

Abad-Santos, Alex. “*How to Get Away with Murder* has the hottest gay sex on television. That’s progress.” *Vox*, 13 Nov. 2014, www.vox.com/2014/11/13/7213021/how-to-get-away-with-murder-gay-sex.

- Apostolides, Zoë. "Why are there so few novels about Aids these days?" *The Guardian*, 15 Mar. 2017.
- Ahmed, Sara. "Happy Objects." *The Affect Theory Reader*, edited by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, Duke University Press, 2010, pp. 29-51.
- Ahmed, Sara.. "Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 12, no. 4, Duke University Press, 2006, pp. 543–74.
- Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*. Duke University Press, 2010.
- Baldwin, James. "Preservation of Innocence." *Collected Essays*, Library of America, 1998, pp. 594-600.
- Benedicto, Bobby. "Agents and Objects of Death." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2019, pp. 273–296.
- Berlant, Lauren Gail. *Cruel Optimism*. Duke University Press, 2011.
- Berlant, Lauren Gail, and Lee Edelman. *Sex, or the Unbearable*. Duke University Press, 2014.
- Bernstein, Jacob. "Racy Gay Scenes in 'How to Get Away With Murder' Draw a Following." *The New York Times*, 12 Nov. 2014, www.nytimes.com/2014/11/13/style/racy-gay-scenes-in-how-to-get-away-with-murder-draw-a-following.html.
- Bersani, Leo. *Homos*. Harvard University Press, 1996.
- Bersani, Leo. *Is the Rectum a Grave?: And Other Essays*. University of Chicago Press, 2010.
- "Bury Your Gays." *TV Tropes*, 2 Apr. 2023, <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/BuryYourGays>.
- Butler, Judith. "Gender is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion." *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, Routledge, 2011, pp. 81-98.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. 1990. Routledge, 2006.

Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 40, no. 4, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988, pp. 519-531.

Canning, Richard, and Dale Peck. *Vital Signs: Essential Aids Fiction*. Carroll & Graf, 2007.

Caserio, Robert L. "The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory." *PMLA*, vol. 121, no. 3, 2006, pp. 819–820.

Castiglia, Christopher, and Christopher Reed. *If Memory Serves: Gay Men, Aids, and the Promise of the Queer Past*. University of Minnesota Press, 2012.

Collu, Samuele. "Refracting Affects: Affect, Psychotherapy, and Spirit Dis-Possession." *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2019, pp. 290–314.

Connolly, Kelly. "Schitt's Creek Captures the Unexpected Joy of Being Seen." *TV Guide*, 22 June 2020, www.tvguide.com/news/features/schitts-creek-no-homophobia-dan-levy-pride/.

Cunningham, Michael. "Surviving AIDS, but at What Cost?" *The New York Times*, 25 June 2018.

Dawkins, Richard. *A Devil's Chaplain: Selected Essays*. Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003.

Dean, Tim. "The Antisocial Homosexual: The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory." *PMLA*, vol. 121, no. 3, 2006, pp. 826–828.

Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016.

Didion, Joan. *We Tell Ourselves Stories in Order to Live: Collected Nonfiction*. Everyman's Library, 2006.

Dry, June. "'Modern Family' Finale: How Cameron and Mitchell Forever Changed Gay Families

- on TV.” *Indie Wire*, 10 Apr. 2020, www.indiewire.com/2020/04/modern-family-finale-cam-mitchell-gay-families-1202224229/.
- Easton, Anne. “Groundbreaking ‘Modern Family’ Bows Out After Making Its Mark On TV.” *Forbes*, 8 Apr. 2020, www.forbes.com/sites/anneeaston/2020/04/08/groundbreaking-modern-family-bows-out-after-marking-its-mark-on-tv/.
- Edelman, Lee. “Antagonism, Negativity, and the Subject of Queer Theory: The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory.” *PMLA*, vol. 121, no. 3, 2006, pp. 820–823.
- Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Duke University Press, 2004.
- “Finalist: *The Great Believers*, by Rebecca Makkai (Viking).” *The Pulitzer Prizes*, 2019, www.pulitzer.org/finalists/rebecca-makkai/.
- Finney, Brian. “The Professor: *A Single Man*.” *Christopher Isherwood: A Critical Biography*, Oxford University Press, 1979, pp. 247-255.
- Flanzbaum, Hilene. *The Americanization of the Holocaust*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.
- Gagnon, Julien. “‘A Chain of Transmission from the Past’: Transmission of HIV/AIDS in Multigenerational Historical Fiction.” *Post45 Graduate Symposium*, 2021.
- Gagnon, Julien. “‘Replacing the Political with the Personal’: Myths of the Homophobic Homosexual in Baldwin, Isherwood, and Highsmith.” *McGill University Undergraduate Thesis*, 2020.
- “Gay.” *Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries*, Oxford University Press, https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/english/gay_1?q=gay.
- Halberstam, Judith. “The Politics of Negativity in Recent Queer Theory: The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory.” *PMLA*, vol. 121, no. 3, 2006, pp. 823–825.

- Halperin, David M. *How to Be Gay*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012.
- Hanson, Ellis. "The Future's Eve: Reparative Reading After Sedgwick." *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 110, no. 1, 2011, pp. 101–119.
- Haraway, Donna. *Manifestly Haraway*. University of Minnesota Press, 2017.
- Haraway, Donna. "The Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies: Constitutions of Self in Immune System Discourse." *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. Routledge, 1991, pp. 203-230.
- Hebdige, Dick. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. 1979. Taylor & Francis, 2002.
- Herek, Gregory M. "Beyond 'Homophobia': Thinking About Sexual Prejudice and Stigma in the Twenty-First Century." *Sexuality Research & Social Policy*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2004, pp. 6-24.
- Herrera, Andrea O'Reilly. "Women and the Revolution in Cristina Garcia's 'Dreaming in Cuban.'" *Modern Language Studies*, vol. 27, no. 3/4, 1997, pp. 69–91.
- Hirsch, Marianne. "The Generation of Postmemory." *Poetics Today*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2008, pp. 103–128.
- "HOMOFOBIA?" *YouTube*, uploaded by Jair Bolsonaro, 1 Jan. 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=mbiNDU3ztyw.
- Iftikhar, Asyia. "*House of the Dragon* gives queer character happy ending in major departure from books." *The Pink News*, 3 Oct. 2022, www.thepinknews.com/2022/10/03/house-of-the-dragon-laenor/.
- Illouz, Eva. *Why Love Hurts: A Sociological Explanation*, Polity, 2012.
- Katz, Jonathan. *The Invention of Heterosexuality*. University of Chicago Press, 2007.
- King-Miller, Lindsay. "Why Calling Mike Pence A 'Closet Case' Is Harmful To LGBTQ

- People.” *Role Reboot*, 3 April, 2017.
- Kitzinger, Celia. “Heteropatriarchal Language: The Case Against Homophobia.” *Onlywomen Press*, 1987, pp. 15-20.
- Kitzinger, Celia. “Speaking of Oppression: Psychology, Politics, and the Language of Power.” *Preventing Heterosexism and Homophobia*, SAGE Publications, 1996, pp. 3-19.
- Kornhaber, Spencer. “The *Modern Family* Effect: Pop Culture’s Role in the Gay-Marriage Revolution.” *The Atlantic*, 26 June 2015, www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/06/gay-marriage-legalized-modern-family-pop-culture/397013/.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez, Columbia University Press, 1982.
- Linnell, Christine. “Don’t Worry, Dan Levy Says *Schitt’s Creek* Will Get a Happy Gay Ending.” *Pride*, 31 May 2019, www.pride.com/tv/2019/5/31/dont-worry-dan-levy-says-schitts-creek-will-get-happy-gay-ending.
- Linnell, Christine. “Threesomes, Marriage, Kids: *Schitt’s Creek* Depicts a Modern Gay Couple.” *Advocate*, 25 March 2020, www.advocate.com/television/2020/3/25/threesomes-marriage-kids-schitts-creek-depicts-modern-gay-couple.
- Machado Sáez, Elena. *Market Aesthetics: The Purchase of the Past in Caribbean Diasporic Fiction*. University of Virginia Press, 2015.
- Michaels, Walter Benn. *The Shape of the Signifier*. Princeton University Press, 2013.
- Muñoz José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York University Press, 2019.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. “Thinking beyond Antirelationality and Antiutopianism in Queer Critique: The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory.” *PMLA*, vol. 121, no. 3, 2006, pp. 825–826.

- Murphy, Tim. *Christodora*. Picador, 2016.
- Parlett, Jack. "Why 2017 was the post-Moonlight era for film." *Dazed*, 2017.
- Pearl, Monica B. *Aids Literature and Gay Identity: The Literature of Loss*. Routledge, 2013.
- Prom, Bradley. "Game of Thrones: 10 Most Brutal And Horrific Deaths, Ranked." *Screen Rant*, 2 Dec. 2022, <https://screenrant.com/game-of-thrones-brutal-horrific-deaths-ranked/>.
- Rollyson, Carl E. *Understanding Susan Sontag*. University of South Carolina Press, 2016.
- Saltzman, Arthur M. "Epiphany and Its Discontents: Coover, Gangemi, Sorrentino, and Postmodern Revelation." *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 15, no. 4, 1989, pp. 497-518.
- Schulman, Sarah. *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination*. University of California Press, 2012.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. 1990. University of California Press, 2008.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is about You." *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, Duke University Press, 1997, pp. 1-37.
- Shae Rodriguez, Nathian. "How to Get Away with Being Gay on TV's Hottest Murder Series: Gay Representation in *How To Get Away With Murder*." *Critically Queer: A Collection of Queer Media Critiques and Character Analyses*, vol. 2, 2 May 2017.
- Shultz, Zach. "Queer Homecoming: On Carter Sickels's 'The Prettiest Star'." *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 12 Sept. 2020.
- Siken, Richard. *War of the Foxes*. Copper Canyon Press, 2015.
- Sontag, Susan. *Aids and Its Metaphors*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989.

Stanley, Eric. "Near Life, Queer Death: Overkill and Ontological Capture." *Social Text*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2011, pp. 1-20.

Stanley, Eric A. "Slow Boil: AIDS and the Remnants of Time." *Why Are Faggots so Afraid of Faggots?: Flaming Challenges to Masculinity, Objectification, and the Desire to Conform*, edited by Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore, AK Press, 2012, pp. 157-163.

Stockton, Kathryn Bond. "Prophylactics and Brains: *Beloved* in the Cybernetic Age of AIDS." *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, edited by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Duke University Press, 1997, pp. 41-73.

Summers, Claude J. "'The Waters of the Pool': Christopher Isherwood's *A Single Man*." *Gay Fictions: Wilde to Stonewall*, Continuum, 1990, pp. 195-214.

Sycamore, Mattilda Bernstein. *Why Are Faggots so Afraid of Faggots? : Flaming Challenges to Masculinity, Objectification, and the Desire to Conform*. AK Press, 2012.

Viruet, Pilot. "Finally, Queer Joy Is Infiltrating TV." *TV Guide*, 25 June 2020, www.tvguide.com/news/features/queer-joy-tv-schitts-creek-pose-one-day-at-a-time-pride/.

Watney, Simon. *Imagine Hope: Aids and Gay Identity*. Routledge, 2000.

Wiegman, Robyn. "The times we're in: Queer feminist criticism and the reparative 'turn'." *Feminist Theory*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2014, pp. 4-25.

Wilde, Alan. "Memento Mori." *Christopher Isherwood*, Twayne Publishers, 1971, pp. 127-138.

Williams, Jordan. "You Just Saw *House of the Dragon*'s Only Happy Character Ending." *Screen Rant*, 3 Oct. 2022, <https://screenrant.com/house-dragon-laenor-velaryon-happy-ending/>.

Wong, Danielle. "Screen Time, or the Postviral Internet." *Post45*, October 2020.

Woodhouse, Reed. *Unlimited Embrace: A Canon of Gay Fiction, 1945-1995*. University of Massachusetts Press, 1998.