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## An Archive of Pain: In Queer Suicide's Cultural Wake

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# AN ARCHIVE OF PAIN: IN QUEER SUICIDE'S CULTURAL WAKE

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
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in

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by

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## Table of Contents

Acknowledgments .....	ii
Abstract .....	iv
Introduction: Writing Queer Suicide Critically and Culturally .....	1
Chapter 1: The Problematic of Queer Precarity and Normativity .....	39
Chapter 2: The Suicide of Leelah Alcorn: .....	56
Whiteness in the Cultural Wake of Dying Queers	
Chapter 3: The Suicide of Aaron Hernandez: .....	91
Carceral Queer of Color Masculinity and Sexuality	
Chapter 4: The Hunger Strike and Suicide Attempts of Chelsea Manning: .....	127
Identifications of Transnationalist Queer Heroism	
Chapter 5: Conclusion: Queer Lessons in/of Suicide .....	160
References .....	172
Vita.....	193

## **Abstract**

In this dissertation, I argue that queer death is a chief site of political struggle over gender, race, and sexuality in contemporary culture. I consider myriad archives in the aftermath of three queer suicides, an aggregate of discourses I call *cultural wakes*, to examine how white affective investments circulate around the forces of racism, sexism, and citizenship. I place in situ the trauma of queer pain and loss against the global backdrop of public emotionality.

## **Introduction. Writing Queer Suicide Critically and Culturally**

In September 2010 I heard of a salvo of suicides committed by queer youth. No exhaustive public list exists but I have gleaned together a personal archive, which includes: 15-year old Billy Lucas, 17 year-old Cody Barker, 13 year-old Seth Walsh, 18 year-old Tyler Clementi, 13 year-old Asher Brown, 15 year-old Harrison Chase Brown, 19-year-old Raymond Chase, 17 year-old Felix Sacco, 14 year-old Caleb Nolt, 18-year-old Alec Henriksen, and 13 year-old Ryan Halligan. As the summer of 2010 closed, one queer was not yet in the ground before the next was discovered. The salvo of suicides would soon emerge as an occasion for discourse and political action, or in other words, a queer kairotic marked by ambivalence and contradictions.

In many ways, within the archive of dead and dying queers, I locate my own relationship with the rhetorical exigence of queer suicide. The sudden spotlight of queer youth killing themselves that summer did not surprise me. The September suicides confirmed what many queers, including myself, had long already known that, at its ontological core, to be queer is to be standing at the threshold of death. Whether it be running into the person who ends our lives, losing yourself or a loved one to the decades-long governmental nonresponse to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, or realizing that the person who ends your life may be yourself, dead and dying queers in the United States have long been ensconced within cultural trauma perpetuated through structural violence. Considering that the structures of racism, sexism, coloniality, and homophobia place those at the intersection of multiple oppressions at the precipice of their own death, I wanted to know why and how the politics of the world were connected to the fact that young queers were feeling sad, or perhaps angry enough to consider suicide as a viable and volatile option. This is a project on queer suicide, but I do not want to suggest that queerness

only performs when at a loss. Rather, just as the violence committed against queers remains plainly evident so too is the fact that queers endure. I echo Fred Moten, who, while tracing the history of blackness within chattel slavery, argued that despite immense injustices, “objects can and do resist.”<sup>1</sup> Queer resistance, in some cases, may simply look like deciding to stay.

Throughout this dissertation, I intentionally forego appeals to medical and psychological discourse; rather, I find it more productive to think through queer pain and suicide without pathologizing it but, recognize how personal experiences are situated within larger social and political structures and how that pain is politicized and mobilized within the cultural wake of the dead suicidal queer. Following the call of scholars such as Ann Cvetkovich, I intend to depathologize negative feelings” surrounding suicide, “so that they can be seen as a possible resource for political action rather than its antithesis.”<sup>2</sup> Moreover, this dissertation is about representations and mobilizations of suicide, not physical acts of suicide themselves. Inspired by feminist scholar Sarah Projansky, I suggest that suicide discourse is to suicide in a similar way that “AIDS discourse is to AIDS and cancer discourse is to cancer.”<sup>3</sup> Discourses of a particular phenomenon are both “productive” and “determinative” to the thing itself and are therefore worthy of analysis.

### **A Queer Kairotic: The Cultural Wake as Heuristic**

Traditional interpretations of kairos recognize time’s transience<sup>4</sup>, the rhetorical consequence of which is that opportunities for actions are temporary and, to borrow the oft-cited phrase from Hebert Wichelns, “bonded to the occasion.”<sup>5</sup> Similar to traditional wakes, a time-bound funerary ritual which provides the bereaved one last viewing of the body before burial, cultural wakes, I argue, are symbolically powerful discursive rituals that, through their enactment, produce affective and collective social memory. Thus, such an interpretation of

kairos is useful in theorizing the cultural wakes of suicidal queers given rhetors must capture the “opportune moment” before it passes. This dissertation makes the case that queer deaths (or near deaths) by suicide are exigent occasions for discourse for various publics to grapple with the vast complexities of queerness generally and queer suicide specifically through what I term cultural wakes. For while it is true that the usual emotions of profound loss, grief, and sadness accompany funerary rituals, such times are also an opportunity for collective mobilizing.<sup>6</sup>

In the context of white hetero-patriarchy, cultural wakes, considered as social ritual performances and negotiations of public grief in times of profound crises, produce and circulate white affective investments and affects. In this dissertation, I trace how discourses that reinforce whiteness, homonormativity, homonationalism, and the erotics of racism within contemporary culture manifest in cultural wakes following queer suicides. Given that suicide, or attempted suicide, is foundational to the cultural wakes I examine, I find it useful to define queer suicide here. Queer suicide is both a performatively and rhetorically charged event that begets the cultural wake and emergences within a conjuncture. Suicide may include the suicidal act itself (which is symbolic and communicative) and/or the subsequent cultural reactions which can be traced through public discourse, social movements, events, political speech and acts, cultural productions, and media. It may be the case that other forms of self-destruction and self-immolation fall under the term suicide, as is the case of Chelsea Manning. In my analysis of three case studies of cultural wakes following queer suicide, I suggest that queer suicide organizes and arguably produces homonormative understandings of white queer sensibilities in contemporary America. More specifically, the manifestations of queer pain and queer suicide operate within cultural contexts of injustices including, but not limited to: racial oppression via



white supremacy and mass incarceration, and compulsory heterosexuality via white normative expectations of gender, sexuality, and citizenship.

At this point, the use of conjuncture in my definition of the cultural wake gestures toward an investment in cultural studies' ongoing conversation about contingency within historical contexts. As defined by Stuart Hall, the concept of conjuncture describes the "complex historically specific terrain of a crisis which affects – but in uneven ways – a specific national-social formation as a whole."<sup>7</sup> Lawrence Grossberg explains that "it is not a slice of time or a period but a moment defined by an accumulation/condensation of contractions, a fusion of different currents or circumstances."<sup>8</sup> Conjuncturalism, notes Grossberg, "looks to the changing configuration of forces that occasionally seeks and sometimes arrives at a balance or temporary settlement."<sup>9</sup> The crucial point in conjunctural analysis, according to Grossberg, is that it is not necessarily a retreat from radical contextualism but offers an imperative to map the complexity of the conjuncture in terms of its "spatial scale and temporal duration" in its national, international, transnational, and global practices.

This dissertation analyzes strategic whiteness as it manifests within the cultural wake, intervening in the fields of critical whiteness studies and the politics of queer grief. Given that strategies of whiteness dictate who gets read as grievable and worthy of remembrance within queer history, I map how white affective investments rend some queers as martyrs while others, to borrow a phrase from Chandan Reddy, are left for dead. I write from a feminist and queer ethic recognizing that both national and personal traumas of queer suicide and their cultural memory thereof may on one hand afford the possibility to participate in counter-hegemonic resistance while, on the other, reify extant ideologies of domination. Given this conundrum, I am presented with a vexing paradox: a very real and personally felt desire to end suicide and a need

to represent it as an immediate crisis.<sup>10</sup> I avoid sensationalized graphics and narratives of the suicidal act that pimps their pain and trauma onto my readers.

Towards these ends, in this dissertation, I engage in a cultural critique of the queer suicide. I examine cultural discourses and other embodied performances of contemporary queer suicide in mediated contexts. I analyze several case studies wherein the dead or otherwise dying queer body is ensconced within and produced from the fusion of multiple institutions of oppression. I map the political and social controversies of queer suicide as they construct and recirculate national and local levels of public emotionality. Considering that conjunctural criticism maps the configuration of forces that sometimes arrive at a settlement, then I am interested in excavating the ways in which the global forces of racial oppression via white supremacy and mass incarceration, and compulsory heterosexuality via normative expectations of gender, sexuality, and citizenship command certain bodies grievable in public settings. My cultural critique in this dissertation is mobilized and inspired by queer of color criticism which affords the opportunity to map, critique, and call in question rhetorics of strategic whiteness, heterosexuality, white normative homonormativity, and other hegemonic ideologies.

In the section that follows, I provide a critical self-reflection on how I came to this project, suicide, and whiteness. I then introduce intersectionality and queer of color critique as the primary critical orientations to the study of whiteness in the cultural wake. I then operationalize queerness and suicide before turning to the methodological impetus of cultural studies and the symbolic archive and embodied repertoire. I conclude with a summary of chapters and my research questions.

## **Coming to Suicide, Coming to Whiteness**

The impetus for this dissertation, the suicide of Leelah Alcorn, was my awakening to both my own suicide attempt a decade earlier and a more nuanced understanding of my own whiteness. I struggled to reckon with both, but in 2014, when I read Alcorn's suicide note, I experienced a convicting moment, the need to imagine how both my experience with queer suicide and my lived whiteness each framed how I understood the other. Given that my identification with Alcorn in death was the major impetus for this project, I reflect on that catalytic given that critical self-reflexivity affords the opportunity to examine structural oppression and privilege. Considering I analyze strategic whiteness in the cultural wake of dead and dying queers, I am aware that white reflexivity, when done incorrectly, may actually reproduce whiteness. Vivianna Namaste explains how individually-focused self-reflection, at the expense of collective action, "becomes milieu in which the privileges of these white subjects matter the most, even at the very moment said privileges are acknowledged."<sup>11</sup> Yet, Carol Lynee D'Arcangelis suggests that white-scholar activists may in fact engage in ethical reflexivity if remaining "explicitly vigilant about the ways in which our individual and collective subjectivities are tightly bound up in one another."<sup>12</sup> In this spirit, I turn now to the winter of 2002 in rural northeast Iowa.

Like, presumably many other white children who grew up in abject poverty in predominantly white rural Iowa I was sharply more aware of my lack of class-based privilege and the need to keep secret my sexuality than I was of my white privilege. I was raised by a single-father whose substance abuse prevented him from keeping a long-term job or a long-term girlfriend. The years he spent as a day laborer, contingent construction worker, or slaughterer in the meat packing plant were lived together in extended stay hotels, monthly rental units, or when

things were particularly hard, I would stay at my friend Admir's house, a refugee of the Bosnian genocide. I remember those times fondly because Admir's baba treated me like her own grandchild and when she was teaching me how to braid garlic and speak Bosnian I forgot about the times that I was left home alone for several days by my dad or the time he put his hands around my neck in 1995 when I was five. When I was with Admir's family, I remember being proud that I had mastered the blend of Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian languages and that people thought Admir and I were brothers. Admir introduced me to Nuriya, a boy from Velika Kladuša, who was the cutest boy I had ever seen and when we were eleven, we started locking ourselves in his bedroom. It's been twenty years since I've spoken Bosnian and now I only remember fragments: zdravo, šta ima, hvala, izvinite, peachka.

In 2002 we moved ten miles into the country away from Admir, his baba, and Nuriya. When I was twelve, my dad started coming home less so I taught myself how to cook, how to kindle fire in the wood burner so the house would have heat, and how to self-harm. One night I scoured the house for every pill I could find. Frustrated with my father's absence and alcoholism coupled with my loneliness and shame I internalized with being gay, I took the pills, went to bed, and to my surprise, woke up the next morning. I tore up the note I had written and let the shreds of paper fly out of the bus window on my way to school. After middle school, I internalized the message that education was my way out of poverty and away from my father. A product of homogenous white rural Iowa, I failed to realize how my working-class, education-seeking white identity was forged from the structural racism both within and outside of the Iowa countryside.

As I entered college and found communication studies, I also found a vocabulary to make sense of my own experiences and how they were connected to and different from others. I worked for the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees where I

campaigned across the state for the raising of the minimum wage and union organizing. At that time, in the aftermath of the Iowa Supreme Court ruling legalizing same-sex marriage in the state, Bob Vander Plaats spearheaded a successful campaign against the retention of three of the judges. Though the judges were eventually removed from the bench, I walked door to door with One Iowa and other statewide organizers who fought against the referendum. As an undergraduate, though I embraced an agitating queer working-class identity, I failed to “detect vestiges in my own life of how deeply committed I (as someone who enjoys race privilege) was to versions of racism and oppression that allowed me to refuse being implicated in the racialized order of things.”

When Alcorn stepped in front of that semi in 2014, I was twenty-four and half way through my master’s degree at the University of Northern Iowa. I was still learning how to talk about multiple systems of oppression as they coalesce around particular traumas. Her suicide note awoke in me what lay dormant for over twelve years. I remember being gutturally moved at her suicide note. I remember how she engaged in poiesis speaking into existence the trauma she endured at the hands of parents that cared for her deeply just in the wrong ways. Through her suicide, Alcorn became something of a martyr despite that she in hardly any way at all represented the transgender experience nor the violence committed against transgender and queer people of color. The more I learned about Alcorn the more I learned about the pain we experienced, was for lack of a better term, banal. While her queerness was a manifest source of trauma, the posthumous collapsing of difference in her cultural wake failed to account for the ways in which her whiteness protected her in the cultural memory at the expense of others. I also initially failed to account for how my grief was based in a politic of grievability that refused to recognize how my identification with her was very much implicated in the racialized order.

In this reflection, I have chronicled how as a child, adolescent, and nascent scholar of communication studies, I have been marked by structural contradictions that account for and complicate my queerness, white privilege, and working-class subjectivity. The structural contradictions of my own experiences coupled with the structural contradictions of Alcorn complicate overdetermined and individuated narratives of oppression. In this reflection, I have attempted to give form to the impetus for the dissertation which is rooted in my still-developing awakening to my own whiteness and queer past.

### **Intersectionality and Queer of Color Critique**

As intersectionality and queer of color critique are the implicit guiding critical orientations throughout my case studies, the intellectual history of intersectionality is worth examining here. The use of intersectionality in this section title indicates a specific investment throughout the dissertation in theorizing both identity and oppression. The Combahee River Collective, a group of queer Black feminist women, in 1974 outlined how, in their own words, the “major systems of oppression are interlocking.”<sup>13</sup> In the statement they explain

We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in Black women's lives as are the politics of class and race. We also often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously. We know that there is such a thing as racial-sexual oppression which is neither solely racial nor solely sexual, e.g., the history of rape of Black women by white men as a weapon of political repression.<sup>14</sup>

The arguments advanced by the Combahee River Collective compelled activists to recognize how the “liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy.”<sup>15</sup>

The following decade saw many feminist women of color mobilize a similar ethic of the Combahee River Collective’s intersectional critique. In 1981 Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, in their anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*,

advanced a “theory of the flesh” warning both activists and scholars that when it comes to the intersections of race and sexuality, “the danger lies in ranking the oppression. The danger lies in failing to acknowledge the specificity of the oppression.”<sup>16</sup> In 1984, Audre Lorde, a self-described Black lesbian feminist, in the spirit of the Combahee River Collective, wrote, “I find I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present that as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of myself. But this is a destructive and fragmenting way to live.”<sup>17</sup> In 1987, Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* offered a description of the overlapping nature of her identity and the hybridity of her multiple identity locations. Through detailing the myriad types of borders between those who were neither fully Mexican nor fully American, Anzaldúa historicized her overlapping identities as a Chicana lesbian feminist. At the decade’s close in 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw was the first to use the term intersectionality to describe how employment law that used the distinct categories of sex and race failed to protect Black women in the workplace whose discrimination is based in overlay of both racism and sexism.<sup>18</sup> Crenshaw’s contribution allowed scholars and activists to more fully theorize how “major axes of social division in a given society at a given time, for example race, class, gender, sexuality, dis/ability, and age operate not as discrete and mutually exclusive entities, but build on each other and work together.”<sup>19</sup> While certainly not exhaustive of the breadth of feminist work done in the 1980s, the work of the Combahee River Collective, Anzaldúa, Moraga, Lorde, and Crenshaw certainly did the critical labor to lay the foundation for communication studies scholars to employ intersectionality in their own work.

In the following decade, many more feminists continued to examine the ways in which race and racism manifest in individual and collective lived experience. For example, Olga Davis’ “A Black Woman as Rhetorical Critic” is one of many profound examples of essays that

take to task the racism embedded in early postmodernist thought from rhetorical scholars like Wander, McKerrow, McGee, and Lucaites and Condit. Davis writes “what postmodernists fail to see, however, is that essentialist assumptions continue to reify the central position of privilege...Postmodern critiques fail to explicate the politics of Black subjectivity and the nature of identity politics for Black and other oppressed groups.”<sup>20</sup> Davis argues for the importance of unique space for and by Black women so they may “transform dominant discourses of theory and practice.”<sup>21</sup> Davis argues

Some critics suggest that “validating” a Black feminist approach to rhetorical criticism requires critics to locate ideas within existent rhetorical theory and then insert the ideas and experiences of Black women within these assumptions. Such a suggestion informs the prevailing hegemony of racism and sexism that is maintained within our academic institutions and scholarly avenues of innovative thought. It also points to the way in which a Black woman’s standpoint may be unsettling for those critics and scholars who are accustomed to having subordinate groups frame their ideas in ways that are convenient to the more powerful.<sup>22</sup>

Creating a new space for Black women occurs through rhetorical practice, which not only recognizes the experiences of Black women but redefines them on their own terms.<sup>23</sup> Davis, thus, engaged in ideological critique by way of critiquing and calling forth a new understanding of the rhetoricity and power-laden function of recognition.

### **Queer of Color Critique and Strategic Whiteness**

Queer critique, for Benny LeMaster “locates and addresses the ways that heteronormativity is reified, produced, performed, ritualized, and taken for granted.”<sup>24</sup> Queer of color critique, for Roderick Ferguson, extends both queer critique, women of color feminism, and intersectional thought through investigating “how intersecting racial, gender, and sexual practices antagonize and/or conspire with the normative investments of nation-states and capital.”<sup>25</sup> Jesus Valles-Morales and Benny LeMaster suggest that it is possible to “practice queer of color critique” which includes “living a life that is closer to freedom, to liberation, to



embracing the worlds we bring with us...”<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Jeffrey McClune argues that “black queer world-making is a way of making history in a society where black experiences of same-sex desire and interaction are too often under-represented and under-appreciated.”<sup>27</sup> Queer of color critique thus provides the intersectional rigor to map the conjuncture of queer suicide with the contracting structures of white supremacy, compulsory heterosexuality, and sexism.

While queer of color critique’s foundational ethos centers the lives of people of color as they exist at the intersection of multiple and overlapping oppressions, the ethic of queer of color critique also provides useful heuristics in analyzing the strategies of whiteness. For example, Bernadette Calafell writes that critical approaches that engage sexuality and gender cannot ignore how both intersect with the racialized body.<sup>28</sup> Also, while they may have not been explicitly working from a queer of color critique, Thomas Nakayama and Robert Krizek, in their interrogation of whiteness, suggest that whiteness becomes manifest through its status as an uninterrogated rhetorical construction.<sup>29</sup> Elsewhere, Linda Martín Alcoff in her provoking essay titled, “What Should White People Do,” Alcoff notes that “part of white privilege has been precisely whites’ ability to ignore the ways white racial identity has benefitted them.”<sup>30</sup> Given that myopic objectivity is the province of white supremacy, Alcoff calls for both scholars and citizens to develop an “ever present acknowledgement of the historical legacy of white identity constructions in the persistent structures of inequality and exploitation.”<sup>31</sup>

Several scholars have taken up the issue of whiteness within queer theory as they theorized new ways to make sense of queer of color subjectivities that stand on their own outside the white canon. E. Patrick Johnson writes that “because much of queer theory critically interrogates notions of selfhood, agency, and experience, it is often unable to accommodate the issues faced by gays and lesbians who come from ‘raced’ communities.”<sup>32</sup> Johnson offers

“quare,” an alternative to queer, to not only “speak across identities” but to “articulate “identities” so as to “critique stable notions of identity and, at the same time, to locate racialized and class knowledges.”<sup>33</sup> Johnson’s project of quareing queerness was taken up by several other scholars of color who took to task the limits of white queer theory. For example, Wenshu Lee makes another turn with kuare, a splice of *kua* and *er* which may be understood as, “Transnational womanist quare children who are proud and praised and whose critical consciousness is multi-racial, multi-sexual, multi-gendered, and multi-class-based.”<sup>34</sup> Taken together the queer/quare/kuare distinction foregrounds the role race places in the material conditions of historical and contemporary queerness.

Jose Esteban Muñoz theorizes survival strategies of queers of color through the heuristic of disidentification. Disidentification, for Muñoz is “descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobia majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not confirm to the phantasm of normative citizenship.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, in a world hell-bent on destroying one’s self, one is forced to adopt certain survival strategies which may, at times, be utilizing the only resource available: one’s own flesh.<sup>36</sup> Muñoz’s disidentification is helpful in analyzing queer acts of suicide and the strategies of whiteness mobilized in their wake given it provides access to studying not only acts of violence against racialized subjects (i.e., those foreclosed from the wake of Alcorn, Aaron Hernandez, or those queers who fell victim to US war crimes in the Middle East) but also how subjects often can, and do, survive.

Queer of color critique offers a rigorous methodological approach and theoretical ethic with which to engage the limits of the deaths of marginalized subjects and how these deaths by suicide mobilize affective investments surrounding whiteness. In recognizing the multiplicity of

identities, oppression, and systems of domination that guide social scripts of racism, sexism, homophobia, and homonationalism, queer of color criticism coupled with an intersectional orientation sheds light on how deaths in times of crisis becomes politicized and sites of social controversy.

Given that the archive of pain documented in the following chapters considers a white transgender teenager whose martyrdom mobilized en masse queer folks of color as they challenged white supremacy in the politics of grievability, a Latino man whose queered sexuality was the primary means by which white publics enacted their pornographic fantasies, and a white transgender prisoner who, through her carceral pain and hunger strike, rose to the transcendent level of national hero, the aforementioned scholars prove necessary in refusing and revealing the limitations of the color-blindness associated with traditional ideological critique.

### **On Queerness and Queer Suicide**

Queerness, by definition, adopts a politics of ambivalence and resists concretized classifications. Used vernacularly, queer may refer to one's individual identity when other normative labels (i.e., gay) are not felt to adequately describe one's social location. Used theoretically, queerness, since its academic emergence in the 1990s has been debated across the critical humanities as to who, how, and to what extent one is or may become queer. Thus, ontologically, queerness is often derived from competing and conflicting theoretical genealogies.

Queerness, for Alexander Doty, functions not as some umbrella term the way "gay" arguably subsumes and ultimately homogenizes myriad sexual experiences. Rather, queerness refers to that which "evokes complex" and "uncategorizable" responses. Similarly Berlant and Warner, imbue queerness with a generative telos insofar as queer culture refers to "a world-making project."<sup>37</sup> Thus, being queer, making queerness, or engaging in queer world-making is

to foster, “a space of entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projected horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies.”<sup>38</sup> Elsewhere, Rand uses queer to refer to that which is “rooted in indeterminacy and excess and appears as the undecidability.”<sup>39</sup> At base, queerness adopts a politics of ambivalence and gestures toward the anti-normative and taken to the extreme, dangerous. Take for example, Jasbir Puar who argues that through U.S. empire, “orientalism, terrorism, torture, and the articulation of Muslim, Arab, Sikh, and South Asian” identities become wedded through logics of patriotism and war to essentially queer terrorists or those marked as terrorists.<sup>40</sup>

Communication scholar and queer theorist Charles Morris III mapped two distinct ways in which queerness and its study have been deployed within U.S. queer communication studies. I situate this project between the two. The first project adopts a normative telos; what Morris termed “recuperative” projects. Such a project represents a more traditional way of claiming historical figures as gay, lesbian, trans, etc. with the intent to locate oneself historically by way of validating their own subjectivity while also linking themselves to others in the past.<sup>41</sup> In this way, it is perhaps historically, personally, and politically necessary to situate figures in their unique cultural history because for example, though lesbian women, gay men, and bisexual and transgender people may coalesce and organize together, they have historically experienced unique oppressions, and imposed those oppressions on each other, based on racism, patriarchy, sexism, and cisgenderism, etc. The second projects rend more traditional ways of queer sense-making and involves what Morris refers to a “radical queer historical yearning” which seeks to “explode the homo/hetero binary.”<sup>42</sup> The latter critically rejects normative monikers such as “gay” and “lesbian” as analytical categories and instead is committed to:

mapping [desire] in relationship to culturally constructed, normative gender and sexual discursive conditions and performances of their historical moment, and the simultaneous

mapping of our own desire for them, or its absence, in relation to contemporary discourses of academic and cultural ‘normalcy.’<sup>43</sup>

Avoiding the more traditional a priori analytical categories such as “gay” for a more radical cultural critique aligns with Berlant and Warner’s conceptualization of queer world-making. For Berlant and Warner,

the queer project imagine[d] is not just to destigmatize those average intimacies, not just to give access to the sentimentality of the couple for persons of the same sex, and definitely not to certify as properly private the personal lives of gays and lesbian. Rather, it is to support forms of affective, erotic, and personal living that are public in the sense of accessible, available to memory, and sustained through collective activity.”<sup>44</sup>

In this vein, this dissertation focuses on queer suicide because through critically engaging discourses and performances of the agentive reduction of one’s own queer flesh, cultural logics of affective, erotic, and personal living are thrown into bold relief in the most material way.

Arguing over whether or not one is queer or who is queerer than who, would be to miss the point. Rather, I understand queerness as that which postures racial, political, sexual ambivalence and disruptive uncategorizability, while remaining generative and productive in decentering the hegemonic normative status quo. Throughout this dissertation, I may invoke queer to collectively refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender people. I also invoke queer to refer to the general questioning or disturbing of sexual and gender identities or anyone who I cautiously presume to be gay, bisexual, or transgender. It is also, at times, used as an umbrella term to signify anti-normative gender and sexual conditions in any given cultural or political contexts. However, there are times throughout the following case studies when I forego queer for more normative terms such as gay or bisexual. I utilize more specific terms when I personally feel it is necessary to address the specificity of any given sexual subjectivity.<sup>45</sup> I also use both because like scholar Ann Cvetkovich, I believe normative terms such as gay or lesbian and not mutually exclusive with a more radical term such as queer. Having outlined the vernacular and

theoretical assumptions of queerness, I move now to introduce suicide and the way in which it will be operationalized in the sake of this dissertation.

### **Operationalizing Suicide**

As I stated previously, a central ethic in this dissertation is that, although I take up suicide as my focal object, I resist medicalizing and pathologizing the cultural phenomenon of queers killing themselves. To be sure, myriad scholars throughout the social sciences have researched queer suicide<sup>46</sup> with growing attention to suicide among queer youths.<sup>47</sup> Among them, social scientific scholars have made sense of queer suicides in two primary ways. On one hand, scholars<sup>48</sup> have used a minority stress model, first posited by Meyer, which claims “sexual minorities experience unique and chronic stressors” which “have deleterious effects on their mental health.”<sup>49</sup> On the other hand, scholars<sup>50</sup> who studied suicide among queer youth have quantified reported cases of suicides to predict suicides within “at risk” population.

I find the reports and statistics available both in academia and within the public archive are largely trapped within liberal and quantitatively reductive “at risk” logics. Dana Cloud argues that discourses of individuated “consolation, waiting, coping, adaptation, and healing” constitute a “rhetoric of therapy” which Cloud ultimately argues “dislocates political anger that might be directed toward structural social change onto the individual and family, framing responses to crisis in terms of private life.”<sup>51</sup> Similarly, Cvetkovich suggests that in “seiz[ing] control over [trauma] from the medical experts forg[es] creative responses to it that far outstrip even the most utopian of therapeutic and political solutions.”<sup>52</sup> Both Cloud and Cvetkovich suggest that one must think through queer pain, trauma, and suicide as enmeshed in social institutions, bridging connections between personal experiences and feelings and world historical and political events. Yet I acknowledge that while social determinants often traumatize and produce depressive

subjects while at the same time recognizing that brain chemicals and composition, perhaps for genetic reasons, may also lead to depressive episodes.

Social-scientific approaches to the study of suicide and mental illness are generally concerned with biological, quantitative, and psychiatric facets of mental illness. Statistics, though often successful in “proving” the prevalence and severity of anti-queer violence and/or suicide are, for Eric Stanley, an “incalculable referent of the actualized violence” and trauma experienced by queer peoples. This is particularly true, I argue, for statistics on anti-queer violence and death. “The quantitative limits of what gets to count as anti-queer violence” argues Eric Stanley, “cannot begin to apprehend the numbers of trans and queer bodies that are collected off cold pavement and highway underpasses.”<sup>53</sup> Because this dissertation foregrounds the cultural discourses and enactments of queer suicide, I define suicide as both a performatively and rhetorically charged conjuncture (bound by the always contingent and contradictory historical contexts) that includes both the suicidal act itself as well as its subsequent reactions. I hope to link the act of suicide within the current historical, political, and cultural moment. I also do not limit myself to those events where the body’s biological system ends. For example, psychological discourse may refer to “parasuicidality” or “suicidal gestures” as those incidences whose end goal is not material death.<sup>54</sup> In this way, I could consider the performatively charged act of a hunger strike, as a suicidal event still worthy of critical analysis.

### **Analyzing Queer Suicide**

In my writing, I share the same anxieties articulated by Cvetkovich who discloses, in her own project that, “if I wrote about depression in the third person without saying anything about my personal experience of it, it felt like a key source of my thinking was missing.”<sup>55</sup> To be sure, my own experiences with suicide greatly informed this project throughout and several critical

communication scholars have beautifully utilized the method to map how systems of sexist and racialized oppression manifest in daily life.<sup>56</sup> However, rather than use the methods of autoethnography<sup>57</sup> to map my own experiences, I instead introduce ideological critique undergirded by an ethic of cultural studies and conjunctural analysis for addressing both popular and vernacular cultural discourses and performances surrounding queer suicide.

I believe approaching the ideological dimensions of queer suicide through a rhetorical and cultural studies approach affords the opportunity to observe the tumultuous cultural struggle over performances of gender, race, and sexuality. The study of ideology, wrote Terry Eagleton, “is among other things an inquiry into the ways in which people may come to invest in their own unhappiness.”<sup>58</sup> Additionally, Hall defines the *cultural* of cultural studies, as “the actual, grounded terrain of practices, representations, languages, and customs of any specific historical society” along with “the contradictory forms of ‘common sense’ which have taken root in and helped to shape political life.”<sup>59</sup> Together, the twin vocabularies of ideological critique and cultural studies offers insight into the daily struggles with racism, sexism, homophobia, and cisgenderism manifest through the dead and dying queer body.

### **Criticism in Pursuance of Cultural Studies**

In this project I take up queer suicide as my focal object, concerned primarily with what queer suicide does within contemporary culture.<sup>60</sup> My criticism is undergirded by an ethic of cultural studies. Rhetorical scholar Thomas Rostek parallels cultural studies and rhetorical studies because both, he argues:

Aim to reveal the relationship between expressive forms and social order; both existing within the field of discursive practices; both sharing an interest in how ideas are caused to materialize in texts; both concerned with how these structures are actually effective at the point of ‘consumption’; and both interested in grasping such textual practices as forms of power and performance.<sup>61</sup>



Taken as a whole, the relationship between rhetorical studies and cultural studies is fueled by a commitment to mapping and analyzing the world in relation to a text or certain phenomenon in particular contexts. While not in rhetorical studies, proper, Dwight Conquergood held that “the best way to understand how people made meaning of their lives and how they resisted oppression was to study how they performed their identities and how those performance spoke back to structural forms of power.”<sup>62</sup> Conquergood suggests that “culture possesses us as much as we possess it; culture performs and articulates us as much as we enact and embody its evanescent qualities.”<sup>63</sup> More specifically, theories of a culture constituted by and through lived experience, are uniquely suited to make sense of the deeply felt and embodied ways of being and surviving in a world.

In what follows, I briefly trace the evolution of British cultural studies and its development state side before turning to its anti-methodological commitments. I introduce the heuristic of conjunctural analysis and the commitments of this methodological ethic.

In its beginnings, British cultural theorists claimed that cultural studies, as a mode of inquiry, had no “stable disciplinary base”<sup>64</sup> which still rings true today. Authors Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler, in their well-known edited collection *Cultural Studies* explain that “cultural studies has no distinct methodology, no unique statistical, ethnomethodological, or textual analysis to call its own.”<sup>65</sup> In this way, the researcher would be remiss to assume both the research question and methods beforehand. For as the authors explain “the choice of research practices depends upon the questions that are asked, and the questions depend on their context.”<sup>66</sup> Similarly, communication and cultural studies theorist Rachel Hall claimed that “it is entirely possible that the methods of one discipline will not be enough for the task at hand; and you never know which methods you will need until you are knee-deep in a

particular study.”<sup>67</sup> Though Grossberg realized the discipline of communication studies was one of the first to welcome British cultural studies into American academia, he warned that equating culture with communication ran the risk of flattening the myriad complexities of culture.<sup>68</sup> Rather, cultural studies, albeit sometimes housed within the communication discipline must always make such “disciplinary relationships uncomfortable.”<sup>69</sup>

Despite that cultural studies’ methodological ambiguity has long been problematic for critical communication studies, it does offer several useful heuristics with which to engage queer suicide as a unique focal object. For this dissertation, I find useful theories of conjunctures, radical contextualization, and articulation to make sense of queer suicide as both a performatively and rhetorically charged event that includes both the suicidal act itself as well as its subsequent reactions. To begin, Grossberg’s radical contextualization maps “the terrain on which people live and political struggle must be carried out in the contemporary world.”<sup>70</sup> Radically contextualizing events and texts is necessary for cultural practices, such as committing suicide, “are a complex and conflictual place that cannot be separated from the context of its articulation since it has no existence outside that context.”<sup>71</sup> Thus, a rhetorical criticism informed by ideological critique must not only attend to material arrangements but also lived cultural practices. And it is these cultural practices, that, Grossberg argued, are “places where a multiplicity of forces (determinations and effects) are articulated, where different things can and do happen, where different possibilities of deployment and effects intersect.”<sup>72</sup>

Second, Hall and Grossberg offer a method of conjunctural analysis to avoid the aforementioned traps of reductionism and essentialisms. Elsewhere, Lawrence Grossberg described conjecturalism as that which “emphasizes the constant overdetermined reconfiguration of a field producing only temporary stabilities.”<sup>73</sup> Grossberg continues and claims that:

A conjuncture is always a social formation understood as more than a mere context – but as an articulation, accumulation, or condensation of contradictions. Conjuncturalism looks to the changing configuration of forces that occasionally seeks and sometimes arrives at a balance or temporary settlement.<sup>74</sup>

Such a perspective is similar to that of rhetorician Catherine Palczewski who argues “rhetorical history should account for the ways in which bodies become inventional resources in the public sphere.”<sup>75</sup> Later she argues that “attention to the arguing body also demands critics identify the limits of those arguments. Bodies are texts incomplete without attention to their contexts.”<sup>76</sup> In this dissertation, I imagine that queer suicide, a performatively and rhetorically charged conjuncture that includes both the suicidal act itself as well as its subsequent reactions, are conjectures ensconced in and made legible by the interlocuting ideologies of white heteronormativity and cisgender logics of U.S. citizenship.

Finally, Stuart Hall’s conceptualization of articulation, based in an Althusserian view of subjecthood, posits that rather than being social totalizing or expressive, social formations are instead contingently “articulated.”<sup>77</sup> Hall explains,

By the term ‘articulation’, I mean a connection or link which is not necessarily given in all cases, as a law or a fact of life, but which requires particular conditions of existence to appear at all, which has to be positively sustained by specific processes, which is not ‘eternal’ but has to be constantly renewed, which can under some circumstances disappear or be overthrown, leading to the old linkages being dissolved and new connections – rearticulations – being forged.<sup>78</sup>

In this passage Hall clarifies how cultural articulations are not given but instead, in an Althusserian way, called forth in a way that gestures toward and stresses the contingent while attending to the specificity of any given situation or social formation. Communication and cultural studies scholar Jennifer Daryl Slack explains that Hall’s theorization of articulation, while allowing scholars to avoid traps of reductionism and essentialism, also transformed cultural studies “from a model of communication to a theory of contexts.”<sup>79</sup>

With these heuristics in service to my analysis, this dissertation project intervenes in a complex conjuncture (i.e., queer suicide) by way of ideological critique. Moreover, through my analysis I intend to map the terrain within which queers are killing themselves, in a way, radically contextualizing lived struggle as it occurs in contemporary society. Thus, a criticism informed through a lens of cultural studies accounts for the complex and conflictual world in which texts (be it written or performed) are produced. Furthermore, an ideological criticism aiming to account for embodied material struggle gains insight from performance-centered approaches to cultural studies. Conquergood suggests that the project of performance studies, and by extension, cultural studies “makes its most radical intervention” through the excavation of both written and embodied culture.<sup>80</sup> He claims “the constitutive liminality of performance studies lies in its capacity to bridge segregated and differently valued knowledges, drawing together legitimated as well as subjugated modes of inquiry.”<sup>81</sup> Because I understand queer suicide as an embodied conjunctural articulation begot by hegemonic struggles, I throughout my case studies, attend to both the embodied and visceral dimension of queers killing themselves alongside the discursive responses thereof.

### **The Archive and the Repertoire**

A primary theme throughout my case studies is that both within and outside queer counterpublics, the cultural struggle over dead and dying queers is primarily concerned with a politics of remembrance. To put it simply, not all dead, dying, and murdered queers are remembered equally in death. As such, I find Diana Taylor’s distinction between the archive and the repertoire useful to make sense of the archival memory of suicides (extant public discourse) and the performance of suicide itself (a deeply ephemeral and literally embodied choice). I suggest that the struggle over whose death is worthy of recognition and remembrance is

intermingled within classed and racialized struggles over control of a collectivized archive of queer pain. Access to the archive of martyred queers provides a conduit for access to hegemonic performances of public emotionality ultimately honoring their dead over the death of others. Other scholars have recently begun analyzing the embodied repertoire alongside its political axes. For example, Robert Gutierrez-Perez and Luis Andrade yoke together traditional ideographic analysis and the performances of the archive and repertoire in the context of queer marriage. They write

Although traditional ideographic analysis emphasized how ideographic are symbols influenced by socio-political structures that produce distinct ideological mappings, there are diverse cultural performances that carry out the meanings of ideographs in our societies, histories, and politics.<sup>82</sup>

Gutierrez-Perez and Andrade, through analyzing performances of <marriage> (as ideograph) offer “embodied ideographs” as a mode queer of color worldmaking that moves “through the borderlands of the archive/repertoire” to critique the ideograph of marriage.<sup>83</sup>

I am aligned with scholars such as Charles Morris, Erin Rand, and Jack Halberstam who remain methodologically committed to excavating the rhetoricity and performativity of history, be it distant or contemporary. For example, Morris called for archival queers to “utilize the tools of rhetorical criticism and theory to enhance navigation of archives and produce rhetorical histories of archives that will warrant and arm our queer scholarship, pedagogy, and activism.”<sup>84</sup> Elsewhere, Morris suggests that in utilizing methods of what he terms “performance/history” would help [rhetoricians] address the challenge of how, in addition to insightfully theorizing ‘eventual rhetoric,’ critics might also better understand its historical and historicized happening.”<sup>85</sup> Likewise, Rand warns queer critics must realize archive as a space of “invention and theory production.”<sup>86</sup> Halberstam calls for queer scholars to “consider new models of queer memory and queer history capable of recording and tracing subterranean scenes.”<sup>87</sup> For these

queer scholars, there exists a commitment to not only excavating the rhetorical archive but mobilizing it in socially just and radically transformative ways. Thus, as case after case of dead pre-pubescent, middle-aged, and elderly queers from various social, racial, and class backgrounds build my archive, I heed the words of these queer scholars who call for a critical mobilization of queer death to produce a critical history of power struggles of the gendered, sexed, and racialized body under duress.

I build on, yet divert from, the aforementioned scholars call for the excavation of the written or otherwise concretized archive and move to also make sense of the ephemeral embodied act of self reduction; that which in many ways refuses adoption into traditional archives. I use Taylor's distinction between the archive and repertoire to bridge the gap between archived materials and the embodied, performed acts which are so often lost in rhetorical criticism. Reading the rhetorical archive alongside the embodied repertoire of suicide parallels the methodological approach of rhetorical critics adopting a performance-based approach to account for deeply embodied artifacts or texts. For example, Bernadette Calafell argues that theorizing through embodied experience or a "theory of the flesh" allows one to "push back methodologically against traditional approaches in rhetoric, hoping for more complex approaches to embodiment, resistance, and cultural nuances – particularly when examining work by historically marginalized groups."<sup>88</sup>

Archival memory, for Taylor, consists of "documents, maps, literary texts, letters, archaeological remains, bones, videos, films, CDs, all those items supposedly resistant to change."<sup>89</sup> In the case of this project, I consider public discourses, news reports, op-eds, online video memorializations, and other extant narratives as aspects of archival memory. The repertoire, however, consists of enactments of "embodied memory: performances, gestures,

orality, movement, dance, singing – in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge.”<sup>90</sup> So, while I recognize the importance of the rhetorical nature of discourse surrounding queer suicide, I also recognize the act of suicide as an immensely profound embodied practice within queer consciousness. For Taylor, collective acts both embodied and performed “generate, record, and transmit knowledge” in ways that both preserve and call for societal change. For example, through excavating the archive, I can glean together Chelsea’ Manning’s repertoire, which includes the profoundly performative and political nature of her hunger strike via self-starvation. Methodologically, the repertoire privileges the body as epistemic and a site of immense cultural transmission and struggle. Thus, in the dissertation I read the archive (public discourses and other concretized texts in history) alongside the performative repertoire (the act of suicide itself) as a critical sources of inquiry. Coupled together, I rely on both to glean together an archive and repertoire of pain, which accounts for a range of cultural texts that emerge in suicide’s wake.

### **Selecting Deaths as Historical Objects**

With queer suicide as my focal object, I run the twin risk of saying too much and not saying enough. I know that there is no way for me to include the thousands of queers who remain unnamed and unhonored within the queer imaginary, let alone the hundreds listed in my own personal archive. I know that overwhelmingly trans and queer people of color are more likely to be murdered in the United States.<sup>91</sup> I also know that logics of white supremacy make white queer deaths more culturally deserving of collective mourning (and available in the extant archive) than the deaths of queer people of color.<sup>92</sup>

For this dissertation, I chose to analyze the suicides and suicide attempts of three respective queers; individuals who not only represent a variety of queer subjectivities but whose

selection intentionally responds to the systemic racism embedded in the making of queer death's rhetorical legacies. Thus, this dissertation writes into queer history the suicides and wakes of Leelah Alcorn, Aaron Hernandez, and Chelsea Manning. Alcorn, a seventeen year-old White transgender teenager from south Ohio whose martyrdom inspired a widespread queer of color critique in racially-biased media reporting of queer death; Aaron Hernandez, a twenty-seven-year-old Latino former NFL tight end and alleged bisexual man; and Chelsea Manning, a thirty-year-old White trans woman who, at the time of her two suicide attempts and hunger strike, was incarcerated for violations of the Espionage Act, all offer unique insight into the cultural struggles of race, gender, and sexuality in the context of queer death. In selecting three of the most widely reported cases in recent history, I acknowledge the risk that I am missing thousands of others. However, an analysis of the ways in which queers and queer suicides are framed and mobilized at the national level offers insight in how queers in pain enter collective consciousness.

Furthermore, I believe each of these respective case studies offers insight into what is at stake in the politics of remembrance of dead and dying queers. First, in Alcorn's case queers of colors coalesced to form a counterarchive in the hegemonic wake of Leelah Alcorn, ultimately unhinging and critiquing white queer trauma within a counterpublic while mourning their own dead in more public ways. Second, in the case of Aaron Hernandez, I map how queer and non-queer publics came to a rhetorical impasse over Hernandez's sexuality, ultimately bound by the constraints of a binary sexual vocabulary. Finally, in the case of Chelsea Manning, I am interested in how Manning corporeally used her queer starving body to rend and appeal to the carceral constraints of the military, under which she found herself.



I gleaned the textual data for this dissertation from the public archive – local and national digital news media as well as online memorial sites populated by queer vigil participants. In my research, I looked for (1) articles, essays, or documents specifically related to the days leading up to or following the suicide of the respective queer under investigation, (2) articles that had as their main focus public outrage or response to the suicide or suicide attempt of the individual, and finally (3) pieces that directly addressed the relationship between one’s suicide and one’s alleged or conspicuous queerness. In many cases, content from national and corporate journalistic articles were repetitive and citational and were shared across several platforms on the same day. Therefore, I augmented my search with vernacular, socially-mediated content and opened pieces which often took the forms of open letters, seething polemics, and emotion-laden essays which together, offers critical insight into how queer affective appeals in the wake of one’s suicide were mobilized.

My searches yielded hundreds of documents, essays, letters, and videos for each queer all of which populate my archive. For each case study the list, however, was reduced based on repetition, articles that were later updated, or articles that offered little beyond an obituary with short, declarative sentences including dates, ages, and locations and time of death.

This data was then supplemented with primary documents produced by the subject under analysis, all of which were available online. In the cases of Alcorn, Hernandez, and Manning, I was fortunate that their own words were archived and memorialized online in various places. For example, although Tumblr deleted Alcorn’s suicide note at the request of Alcorn’s parents, online queer activists saved and documented it in hundreds of thousands of places across the microblogging platform as well as other websites. Elsewhere, in the case of Aaron Hernandez, journalists published many of Hernandez’s handwritten letter to prison officials acquired through

sunshine laws. Finally, in the case of Chelsea Manning, the American Civil Liberties Union was able to publish Manning's public statement of protest as she began her eventually successful 2017 hunger strike.

The timeline and scope of my project spans three years in contemporary American culture. Alcorn (in 2014), Manning (in 2016), and Hernandez (in 2017) all, in different ways, represent current cultural struggles differently. Though the timeline could be argued as abbreviated, I believe by focusing on contemporary performances and discourses of suicide in a select number of years, I can offer a coherent story of queer death under similar political, social, and cultural times.

### **Research Questions**

A number of questions guide this dissertation. How does queer suicide participate in the maintenance and disruption of queer public memory? How does suicide mobilize white affects within and outside of queer publics? In what ways is queer suicide rendered political? How does queer suicide function as both a reification and subversion of extant power structures? How do discourses and performances of queer suicide function within queer historicity, or the making of history? How does queer suicide, situated within regimes of racism, heterosexism, homonormativity, and expansive military and criminal justice systems serve to sustain and challenge such regimes?

### **Preview of Chapters**

In chapter one, I provide the theoretical framework to engage the dead and dying queer body. I survey the literature on queer intersectionality and the limits of public emotionality in the context of LGBT normative assimilation. I also survey the literature regarding death in radical

queer protest. This literature, when gleaned together, provides the necessary theoretical heuristics with which to approach the precarity of queer suicide.

Chapter two explores the suicide of Leelah Alcorn. On December 28, 2014 seventeen-year old Alcorn, a White transgender teenager, jumped in front of an oncoming semi near her home in Ohio. The suicide note of Alcorn, a 900-word essay spread rapidly throughout the nation. Primarily White queer activists used Alcorn's suicide as a legislative focal point in agitating for federal, but eventually achieving several local and municipal protections from gender and sexual conversion therapies. For example, before being taken down by her parents, Alcorn's suicide note was mobilized by over 200,000 people online, over 350,000 people signed a petition on change.org calling for the enactment of "Leelah's Law;" a law designed to ban conversion therapies on U.S. queer youths, and, thousands more held vigil across the United States.<sup>93</sup> At the one-year anniversary of Alcorn's suicide, the City of Cincinnati voted to become the second in the country, after Washington, D.C. to ban conversion therapies on its youths. Chris Seelbach, the only openly queer member sitting on the council, through tears memorialized Alcorn, "She challenged us to make her death matter, and we're doing just that."<sup>94</sup> At stake, I argue, is more than the material interest in banning conversion therapies on U.S. queer youths. Rather Alcorn's suicide accrues meaning against a broad racialized context of non-response to the systemic violence committed against queer people of color.

Chapter three will examine the rhetorics surrounding the 2017 suicide of Aaron Hernandez. By the time former New England Patriots linebacker Aaron Hernandez hanged himself in his cell at the Souza-Baranowski state penitentiary he had spent nearly three years in solitary confinement. At the cusp of his death, however, were rumors of a "secret" queer sexuality. Incarcerated for the 2013 murder of Odin Lloyd, public discourse reconciled

Hernandez's violent past with revelations that the recently deceased may have been either homosexual or bisexual. Hernandez's wake became a locus of ample public deliberation with journalists and readers around the country reconciling Hernandez's past with new revelations of his queerness. For weeks, the national discourse grappled with the final years of Hernandez's life presumably in the closet. I read the public narrative in Hernandez' wake as one that rhetorically positions Hernandez as victim to the triangulated forces of compulsory street and sport heterosexuality while still largely obfuscating the complexities of mass incarceration of queer and people of color in the United States.

Chapter four understands the two "unsuccessful" suicide attempts and "successful" hunger strike of Chelsea Manning. I am interested in the way in which Manning's agentive reduction of her own flesh and the State's control over her gender and sexual expression came to a carceral en passe that constituted her as unique queer heroine. It was through her hunger strike that Manning's distinctively queer yet incarcerated body came to be understood as legibly trans in the eyes of the state and anti-war queer activists.

Finally, in chapter 5, once I complete my analyses of queer suicide in contemporary American culture, I contextualize queer suicide in relationship to its racial, military, and cultural arrangements. Examining the rhetorics and performances of queer suicide through ideological criticism and cultural studies sheds light on how citizens, particularly queer citizens, enact and perform agency through times of immense psychological, personal, and political distress. I conclude the dissertation by exploring the implications of this project while offering ruminations of where future research may go.

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<sup>42</sup> Morris, *Queering Public Address*, 6-7.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>44</sup> Berlant and Warner, "Sex in Public," 562.

<sup>45</sup> Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2015).

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<sup>51</sup> Dana L. Cloud, *Control and consolation in American culture and politics: rhetoric of therapy* (Thousands Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998), vii.

<sup>52</sup> Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC ; London: Duke Univ. Press, 2017), 3.

<sup>53</sup> Eric Stanley, "Near Life, Queer Death: Overkill and Ontological Capture," *Social Text* 29, no. 2 107 (2011): doi:10.1215/01642472-1259461, 6.

<sup>54</sup> "Definition of Parasuicide," MedicineNet, accessed January 12, 2018, <https://www.medicinenet.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=21820>.

<sup>55</sup> Cvetkovich, *Depression*, 17.

<sup>56</sup> Rachel Alicia Griffin, "I AM an Angry Black Woman: Black Feminist Autoethnography, Voice, and Resistance," *Womens Studies in Communication* 35, no. 2 (2012): doi:10.1080/07491409.2012.724524; Robin M. Boylorn, "Blackgirl Blogs, Auto/ethnography, and Crunk Feminism," *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* 9, no. 2 (2013).; Ragan Fox, "'You Are Not Allowed to Talk about Production': Narratization on (and Off) the Set of CBS's Big Brother," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 30, no. 3 (2013): , doi:10.1080/15295036.2012.755051.



<sup>57</sup> Autoethnographic methods of knowledge production are widely critiqued across the critical humanities. These methods are sometimes correctly and sometimes unjustly critiqued for mobilizing sensationalized and highly personalized narratives that don't foster social or political analysis.

<sup>58</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: an introduction* (London: Verso, 2007), xxii.

<sup>59</sup> Stuart Hall, "Gramsci's Relevance for the study of race and ethnicity," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10, no. 2 (1986): 25.

<sup>60</sup> Cvetkovich, *Depression*, 11.

<sup>61</sup> Thomas Rosteck, *At the Intersection: Cultural Studies and Rhetorical Studies* (New York: Guilford Press, 1999), 2.

<sup>62</sup> Dwight Conquergood, *Cultural Struggles: Performance, Ethnography, Praxis* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 7.

<sup>63</sup> Conquergood, *Cultural Struggles*, 17.

<sup>64</sup> Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler, *Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 2.

<sup>65</sup> Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler, *Cultural Studies*, 2.

<sup>66</sup> Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler, *Cultural Studies*, 2.

<sup>67</sup> Rachel Hall, "Letting the Object of Study Lead: A Cultural Studies Ethic," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (2013): 113, doi:10.1080/10462937.2013.846474.

<sup>68</sup> Lawrence Grossberg, "Can Cultural Studies Find True Happiness in Communication?" *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 4 (1993): 93, doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01308.x.

<sup>69</sup> Lawrence Grossberg, "Can Cultural Studies," 96.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, 90.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, 90.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, 90.

<sup>73</sup> Grossberg, "Does Cultural Studies," 5.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

- <sup>75</sup> Catherine H. Palczewski, "The 1919 Prison Special: Constituting white women's citizenship," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 102, no. 2 (2016): 125, doi:10.1080/00335630.2016.1154185.
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- <sup>77</sup> John Clarke, "Stuart Hall and the theory and practice of articulation," *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 36, no. 2 (2015): 276, doi:10.1080/01596306.2015.1013247.
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- <sup>80</sup> Conquergood, *Cultural Struggles*, 40.
- <sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, 41.
- <sup>82</sup> Robert Gutierrez-Perez and Luis Andrade, "Queer of Color Worldmaking: In the Rhetorical Archive and the Embodied Repertoire," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 38, no. 1-2 (2018): 3, doi:10.1080/10462937.2018.1435130.
- <sup>83</sup> Gutierrez-Perez and Luis Andrade, "Queer of Color Worldmaking," 2.
- <sup>84</sup> Charles E. Morris, III., "Archival Queer," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 9, no. 1 (2006): 147.
- <sup>85</sup> Charles E. Morris, "Performing/Rhetorical Studies: Differential Belonging across Intradisciplinary Borders," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (2013): 105-106, doi:10.1080/10462937.2013.849813.
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- <sup>89</sup> Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 19.

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<sup>91</sup> Maryse Mitchell-Brody and Andrea Ritchie, *Hate Violence against the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Communities in the United States in 2009*, PDF, National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, 2010.

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## Chapter 1. The Problematic of Queer Precarity and Normativity

This chapter outlines the foundations for understanding the dead and dying queer body in contemporary culture. My goal is to chart a historical and theoretical narrative of how the queer body, made visible through its suicide, has become a conjuncture of discursive and embodied contestation. I place the conjuncture of queer suicide into closer dialogue with the political interests of queer emotionality, the nation state, and the politics of normative assimilation. My thinking of queer suicide is greatly informed by 1) the epistemological precarity of recognizing the pain of another, 2) the trauma of the AIDS crisis; and 3) the structure of gay assimilationist politics. It is within these theoretical and historical frameworks that I read the dead and dying queer body alongside the politically agitating queer body as conjunctures of cultural anxieties of whose life is truly worth living and remembering. Put another way, in this chapter, I map a history of how queer communities have grappled with death specifically and corporeal precarity generally. This history informs my critical protocol for it is within this theoretical vocabulary and cultural history that I will situate my three case studies.

### On Apprehending and Recognizing the Pain of Another

Writing about another's suicide is conceptually challenging. To write about suicide is to write about pain and writing about pain flies in the face of pain's inexpressibility. For example, Walter Benjamin suggests that "witnessing war...takes away the ability to speak about it,"<sup>1</sup> a vexing conundrum that Susan Sontag described as the "difficulty of communication."<sup>2</sup> Additionally, Elaine Scarry argues that "to have pain is to have *certainty*" while "to hear about pain is to have *doubt*."<sup>3</sup> In many ways, pain begets doubt for "it is precisely because [pain] takes no object that it, more than any other phenomenon, resists objectification in language."<sup>4</sup> Pain's precarity is based upon a Cartesian logic assuming a "subject-self bounded interiority that relates

to the world through language and other forms of expression.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, any external expression of pain is not pain itself but imperfect, symbolic externalizations and cultural scripts in response to pain. Because of its inexpressibility, Scarry understands pain as fundamentally world- and language-destroying.

In this dissertation, I approach queer suicide as a discursively and embodied conjuncture of pain in particular cultural, historical, and political contexts. Because public responses to these suicides figures greatly into my analysis, I rely on Judith Butler’s distinction between the *apprehension* and *recognition* of another’s pain to glean together an ontological vocabulary to make sense of dying queers in public culture. For Butler, the apprehension of another is weaker of the two and doesn’t mandate an ethical or moral imperative for the one who bears witness. Butler explains apprehension implies “marking, registering, acknowledging without full cognition. If it is a form of knowing, it is bound up with sensing and perceiving, but in ways that are not always – or not yet – conceptual forms of knowledge.”<sup>6</sup> For example, one may apprehend the death of another without realizing (or recognizing) their life was ever worth living, or they were simply destined to suffer. Susan Sontag posits that in making photographic representations of suffering loom larger it may invite people to “defend themselves from what is upsetting” in ways that make one “habituated to the horror of certain images.”<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Ashley Mack and Bryan McCann argue cultural discourse may negotiate public intimacy in ways that “demobilize affective investments in the fates of specific [racialized] kinds of bodies and communities.”<sup>8</sup> So, while one may apprehend violence committed against another, one may still fail to be motivated to address the injured.

In comparison, Butler describes recognizability as the “general conditions on the basis of which recognition can and does take place.”<sup>9</sup> The possibility of recognition, argues Butler, is

predicated on social frames of intelligibility which are “politically saturated.”<sup>10</sup> Drawing from Hegel, Butler defines the act of recognition as “undertaken by at least two subjects, and which...constitutes a reciprocal action.”<sup>11</sup> That is to say that to recognize another as indeed living is a profoundly political phenomenon. Moreover, Butler suggests living a precarious life (which I argue accurately defines queerness) “implies living socially” or understanding “that one’s life is always in some sense in the hands of the other.”<sup>12</sup> The moral imperative, however, does not stop at the recognition of a life lived. Butler contends that:

Our obligations are precisely to the conditions that make life possible, not to “life, itself,” or rather, our obligations emerge from the insight that there can be no sustained life without those sustaining conditions, and that those conditions are both our political responsibility and the matter of our most vexed decisions.<sup>13</sup>

The telos of recognizing the pain of another ought then to, for Butler, transcend to political action.

I understand queer suicide as a social conjuncture resists, in some ways, full symbolic capture. The task of the rhetorical critic becomes then to engage in the complex task of studying the pain of another without “forcing pain itself into avenues of objectification.”<sup>14</sup> Additionally, political theorist Elizabeth Dauphinée warns symbolic translations of pain often “flatten the experience of pain by being able to capture the visible causes or expressions of pain.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, in this project I run the twin risk of 1) not saying enough to do them and/or their pain justice, or 2) saying too much and making claims of another’s pain to which I do not have intimate knowledge.

The political recognizability of another’s pain is inextricably bound within racist ideologies. An illuminating example of the political recognizability of another’s pain includes the deeply personal and political choice of Mamie Till Bradley to display the mutilated lynched

corpse of her son, Emmitt Till. Communication scholars Christine Harold and Kevin Michael DeLuca argue that through displaying Till's body:

She challenged the meaning of lynched black bodies, thus challenging the validity of a Southern white supremacist social order buttressed by these bodies. By moving Till's corpse from a muddy river bottom in the Mississippi Delta to a public exhibition in urban Chicago, Mamie Till Bradley transformed her son from a victim of a white activism to an unforgettable symbol that mobilized a generation of activists.<sup>16</sup>

By symbolically transforming her son's body from a "celebrated spectacle of white hatred" into a "symbol of resistance and community,"<sup>17</sup> Mamie Till Bradley worked to transform the conditions of Black life under Jim Crow. Another example of the symbolic recognition of another's racially-encoded pain involves the performance vigils before, during, and after the 2009 conviction of Andre Andrade for the murder of 18-year-old transgender Angie Zapata. Cram argues that despite the court's inability to mark a victim that did not legally exist (Angie as a woman), the mobilizations of Angie's name and portrait "resisted transphobic disgust while "contesting the bureaucratization of gender and the aesthetic norms of legal culture."<sup>18</sup> As vigil goers flooded the steps of the courthouse, they mobilized their own deeply felt loss for a daughter while entering into a context of legal discourse which foreclosed the possibility of Angie's existence as a trans Latinx woman.

Scholars have also examined the ways in which Black suffering is enacted for a shocked and titillated white audience. Rather than eliciting empathy from White audiences, the "pornotrope," argues Hortense Spillers, disrupts intimacy and uses "the captive body as the source of an irresistible, destructive sensual-ity at the same time – in stunning contradiction - the captive body [becomes] reduced to a thing, becoming being for the captor."<sup>19</sup> Alexander Weheliye maps the pornotrope as a "cross fertilization of violence and sexuality"<sup>20</sup> throughout cultural productions ranging from the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina to the U.S. War on Terror,

to any representation of chattel slavery. Pornotroping is the conduit that “ungenders while also sexualizing” Black bodies in pain because “slavery and its afterlives do not allow for such an easy disentangling of political domination and sexuality.”<sup>21</sup>

In this section, I have outlined the ontological contours of accounting for another’s pain. Drawing from a feminist Butlerian tradition of feminist politics, I conceptualize queer suicide as conjunctures framed through lenses of intelligibility, made recognizable to certain publics in certain contexts. Consistent with my discussion of the ideological dimensions of queer suicide, the recognition and appropriation of queer deaths can adopt a hegemonic and counterhegemonic telos.

### **Queer Affect and Emotionality in the Face of Death**

The AIDS epidemic has arguably achieved status of a national trauma and it is within its shadow that I read the public emotionality of contemporary queer death. Ann Cvetkovic suggests queer formations have long been organized around collective trauma, particularly in the queer response to the AIDS epidemic. As the 1980s came to close, HIV/AIDS in the United States had grown to nation’s 11<sup>th</sup> leading killer. Of the 115,000 killed over 25% were black, most of whom had fallen victim to governmental and social non-response.<sup>22</sup> While some accounts suggests that this threat of death mobilized the entirety of relatively nascent collectivized gay and lesbian community, the AIDS crisis, writes Marita Sturken, “served less as a catalyst to bridge-building than as an example of the profound divisions of race and privilege” in the country.<sup>23</sup> Sturken documents how the public representation of AIDS as a uniquely white gay male disease largely effaced the epidemic in inner cities for years, which overwhelmingly affected Black and Latinx communities. Cvetkovic argues that cultural artifacts such as *Philadelphia* and *Rent* offer a



sanitized version of the disease, effectively archiving the disease largely outside its connections to race, class, and nation (non)intervention.

The activism of ACT-UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) is useful to contextualize contemporary queer death given their deployment of corporeal bodies in times of crisis to respond and incite change in institutional and widespread injustices, particularly queer death. Because of ACT-UP's confrontational style, many critical scholars have examined the profoundly performative and symbolic corporeal tactics used by members of Queer Nation. For example, DeLuca, argues that protestors in both ACT-UP and Queer Nation rejected traditional argument decorum in favor of an "unruly argument," effectively centering and making vulnerable their own body. "An in-your-face body rhetoric" describes DeLuca is fundamentally necessary for "it is the body that is at stake –its meaning, its possibilities, its care, and its freedoms."<sup>24</sup>

The role race and racism played in shaping the trajectory of ACT-UP is a source of controversy among queer historians. Deborah Gould warns that discounting ACT-UP as an explicit "racist organization" obfuscates the ways in which race and racism manifest in protest mobilizations. Gould explains that "racism is pervasive in our society and likely present to some degree in any majority-white activist organization."<sup>25</sup> To be sure, there were several documented instances of racist ideas within the organization. For example racist tensions manifested themselves often within internal conflicts when "some white participants vigorously resisted acknowledging their white privilege and how racism was exacerbating the AIDS epidemic."<sup>26</sup> Yet, many branches of the organization, guided by people of color, fought extensively for "the needs of the poor and working class people with AIDS [and] people of color [while] confronting the racism, sexism, and misogyny within the organization."<sup>27</sup>

So, while race relations within the organization are certainly vexed, the current representations of emotional protest rhetorics of HIV/AIDS activism often reify and re-center whiteness in the ways in which their protests are homogenized. For example, Sturken suggests that

The rage of inner-city communities of color does not necessarily take the style of demonstrations by groups such as ACT UP, which includes civil disobedience at government buildings. The anger that fuels ACT UP and other AIDS activist groups, which have been extremely effective in changing policy and improving treatments, is one derived from entitlement—the idea that the system should be working better for people with AIDS, that people have a right to proper health care and available treatments. This assumption of entitlement is not necessarily shared in inner-city communities, where the system is not perceived as working to one's benefit.<sup>28</sup>

In this way, there existed very different ways in which those people living with AIDS enacted public emotionality depending on the racialized subjectivity they occupied. Thus, while visibility, while assuredly important in combating perceptions of those living with the disease, was undergirded by a whiteness-informed entitlement.

Morris argues that the embodied protest performances of ACT-UP “materially transformed with bodies and words and graphics the definition and meanings and visibilities of AIDS, development of and access to its treatment and prevention, its politics and politicization.”<sup>29</sup> Gould documents the multiple performative tactics used: “acts of civil disobedience, zaps and disruptions, die-ins and other forms of street theatre, meetings with government and other officials, and eye-catching agitprop,”<sup>30</sup> all of which worked to directly confront governmental and societal nonresponse to the rising number of the dead.

Queer activism in the AIDS epidemic offers insight into how death's exigence mobilized affects of public emotionality and mourning. Moreover, the rhetorical lesson here is that affect/emotion are not universals but rather tethered to specific kinds of racialized bodies which

marshall varying degrees of responsibility and culpability within the public sphere of emotionality. Douglas Crimp argues that queers, writing specifically of gay men, are denied normative mourning practices because they are always already at the threshold of their own death. Crimp marries mourning and militancy in a way that reads activism in times of assured death as a response to psychic needs. Crimp explains:

There is no question but that we must fight the unspeakable violence we incur from the society in which we find ourselves. But if we understand that violence is able to reap its horrible rewards through the very psychic mechanisms that make us part of this society, then we may also be able to recognize -along with our rage- our terror, our guilt, and our profound sadness. Militancy, of course, then, but mourning too: mourning and militancy.<sup>31</sup>

Crimp's insight sheds light onto the political stakes of engaging in queer public emotionality in the context of one's precarious life.

The politics of public emotionality in the wake of collectivized queer death has been well documented by critical and communication scholars. For example Rand suggests foundational to the politics of ACT-UP was the public deployment and production of queer affects and emotionality.<sup>32</sup> Gould indexes "rage, anger, indignation, hope, pride, solidarity, fear, shame, embarrassment, guilt, overwhelmedness, desperation, and despair" as performances of queer emotionality in response to the cultural trauma of losing a loved one but also at the threat that you will also possibly be next.<sup>33</sup> In many ways, the ever present threat that you will likely be next to fall victim to governmental non-response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic mirrors the threat that you may too be the very one who ends your life. Moreover, the emoting queer body challenged conventional understandings of queerness and those living with the HIV/AIDS. For example, Rand suggests that the now widely known battle cry "SILENCE = DEATH" and "ACT UP! FIGHT BACK! FIGHT AIDS!" worked to make public the private sphere of queer emotionality and grief. The militancy of the time was deemed necessary by many queers for as

Gould explains, “lesbians and gay men by and large experienced the 1980s not as a period of political openings but as one of increasing state repression and glaring governmental inaction in the fight against AIDS.”<sup>34</sup> Thus, the dead and dying body read alongside the publically agitating queer body have long been sites of cultural anxieties ensconced within broader regimes of whose life was truly worth living and/or saving.

Yet, the history of ACT-UP was notably short lived though the fervor with which queers mobilized around HIV/AIDS at the turn of the decade was unmatched at the national level as a radical-democratic, feminist, pro-sex political organization in the U.S.<sup>35</sup> However, in the early 1990s, Jeffrey Edwards suggests the rapid decline of militant opposition to the AIDS crisis due in part to two colliding forces: 1) the increased societal and political racialization of AIDS and White queer racial backlash.<sup>36</sup> Thus, queer mobilizers, beginning in the 1990s, shifted to more liberal politics of respectability vis-à-vis gay assimilation and mainstream visibility. In summation, the politics of affect, emotion, death and trauma are key registers through which political mobilization occurs within queer agitation opposing institutionalized trauma.

### **Who Is “Left for Dead” within Queer Normative Assimilation.**

Because I argue the cultural wake is the primary means by which queer suicide and death become politicized within the public sphere, I now turn to literature documenting the precarity of queer normative assimilation within recent US history.

Taken together, the repeal of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell [DADT] and Defense of Marriage Act [DOMA] went “down in history as the greatest marker of gay assimilation in the US.”<sup>37</sup> Yet, “Is it normal to want to be normal?” asks Michael Warner.<sup>38</sup> In Warner’s question he problematizes queerness’s recent appeals to the state’s normative institutions such as one’s queer “right to marry” and “right to fight” openly in the nation’s wars. In this section, I survey the

politics and perils associated with normative queer politics paying attention to the way normative assimilation determine whose life, death, and suicide enter public consciousness. While theoretically, queerness, as an academic project, takes as its key premise a “critique of the normative,”<sup>39</sup> in recent decades queerness, as a political movement, has adopted a normative telos, given that marriage and the military have been their primary battle grounds. Given, the normative markers of political “success” for “lgbt” rights in recent years, I take normativity as my object of analysis in this section and I wonder: What does normativity do for queerness in general and the queer body in particular? Is the very concept of a normal queer possible or is it oxymoronic?<sup>40</sup> Who benefits from normative politics? And finally, who is left for dead in White normative politics?

Drawing upon Reddy’s premise of a “freedom with violence” I suggest that racialized subjects are often left for dead, materially and symbolically. To begin, the project of queer assimilation is at heart a project of complicity. Whether it be arguing for marriage equality or for open access to join the armed forces, normative and assimilationist queers are complicit in and benefit from the expense of other queers. For example, Thomas Dunn argues that “same love” or marriage equality discourse, while securing rights for some gays and lesbians, perpetuates systems of inequality rendering abject primarily queers of color.<sup>41</sup> In this way, White affluent cisgender queers benefit from marriage at the expense of other queered and racialized bodies. Dunn argues that white queerness becomes legible only insofar as it is founded upon an “anti-blackness deeply rooted in both neoliberalism and US society.”<sup>42</sup> The assimilationist ethos adopted by these queers was, at base, I suggest about the threat of their own precariously queer death. For example, the US still is one of the only industrialized countries left that still tie many basic health care benefits to the institution of marriage.

Several queers are levied intersectional and materialist-informed critiques against the institution of marriage as well as those normative queers agitating for the right to marry. A common theme among these critiques is that discourses of marriage equality actually obfuscate material inequalities, particularly among racial and class-based lines. For example, Dean Spade and Craig Willse argue that “Marriage is a coercive state structure that perpetuates racism and sexism through forced gender and family norms”<sup>43</sup> through its policies that deprioritize people of color, poor people, trans people, and prisoners. Additionally, Kenyon Farrow hypothesized “if same-sex marriage becomes legal, white people will access that privilege far more than black people. This is especially the case with poor black people who, regardless of sexual preference or gender, are struggling with the most critical of needs (housing, food, gainful employment), which are not met by same-sex marriage....Gay marriage does not adequately address homophobia or transphobia, for same-sex marriage still implies binary opposite thinking, and transgender folks are not at all addressed in this debate.”<sup>44</sup> Additionally, Ryan Conrad claims that “Gay marriage reinforces the for-profit medical industrial complex by tying access to healthcare to employment and relational status in addition to reinforcing the nuclear family as the primary support structure for youth even though nuclear families are largely responsible for queer teen homelessness, depression, and suicide.”<sup>45</sup> Yet, despite these many critiques, the institution and structure of marriage provides immediate and likely deeply needed resources such as healthcare and tax credits otherwise not afforded to them.

Taken together, the litany of critiques levied against the normative project of marriage assimilation gesture toward several problematics: chief among them is that this particular normative politic leaves many queers for dead. There is a material link between normative queer politics and liveable/grievable lives. The (presumed White) monogamous queer couple is then

worth saving in the eyes of the state, whereas, for example, the non-binary sex worker is not. This liberal politic, argued Chandan Reddy, “produced a gendered and sexual political unconscious, which has restricted our ability to discover the alternative solidarities that generated cross-racial alliances challenging liberal and cultural nationalist models of alliance and solidarity.”<sup>46</sup>

Within the normative project of assimilation, the centrality of queer rights is inextricably bound to systems of power and state sanctioned violence. This manifests in two different ways: 1) the linking of hate crime legislation in the United States to its expansive military empire, and 2) the militarization of queer identities. To begin, the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act added sexual orientation and gender identity to the list of federally defined hate crimes which allowed local law enforcement significant federal resources to investigate and prosecute hate-motivated incidents. Chandan Reddy maps how the coupling of the Shepard-Byrd Act with the 2010 National Defense Authorization Act wed civil rights and the United States’ expansive national security together. Reddy suggests that liberal celebratory discourses of the Act’s passage, “evaded altogether the context of the act’s passage, as part of a defense budget nearly as large as all other countries’ defense budgets combined.”<sup>47</sup> Reddy puts it bluntly, “the advancement of LGBTQ rights is necessarily and inextricably connected to the context of a republic at war.”<sup>48</sup>

Several queers have levied critiques against the marshalling and militarization of queerness. Kenyon Farrow argues that agitating for an equal right to fight in the nation’s wars fails to account for the ways in which the military remains the “nation’s defacto jobs program for poor and working-class people.”<sup>49</sup> Erica Meiners and Therese Quinn take aim at the school-to-warzone pipeline claiming the nation runs on a “public policy catastrophe of turning over our

public schools, and some of our nation's poorest youth, to the military."<sup>50</sup> Similarly, Larry Goldsmith argues that the military "is an institution whose fundamental design is to send poor people to die defending the interests of the affluent."<sup>51</sup> Tamara Nopper warned that the repeal of DADT would only increase the size and power of the U.S. military, already the largest in the world.<sup>52</sup> Finally, Jamal Rashad Jones, on the martialing of queerness argues that:

It distracts from the very things that the Queer Liberation movement was founded on: Anti-imperialism, anti-racism, equal access to housing and healthcare, and struggles against patriarchy. It seems almost irrelevant to me whether or not gay soldiers can "come out" in the military when the U.S. military is not only carrying out two genocidal campaigns for U.S. imperialism and corporate profit, but also when the war budget is draining the funds needed for almost every other service we so desperately need in this country. <sup>53</sup>

I read Jones alongside the several other queer critiques as queer theory. A queer theory that purports queers agitating for the right to join the military as an impure and/or flawed politic for they leave for death both domestic and international queers.

## **Conclusion**

In developing the claims made in the introduction and first chapter of this dissertation, I now turn to my first case study to examine how queer suicide, as a unique cultural conjuncture, is characterized by the politics of recognizability, undergirded by logics of a White youthful innocence. Part of this project, then, is to recognize the vexed role that gender, race, and sexual-based movements have played in challenging and maintaining contemporary social relations. Taken together, this project assumes the complex task of mapping how queer suicide, as a unique cultural conjuncture, functions within contemporary culture. The agentive dead and dying queer body, situated against a long history of queer corporeal protest tactics, is ensconced within broader regimes of power and domination such as White assimilation activism which obfuscates the material conditions in which many queers of color live. In the chapters that follow, I seek to



contextualize the discourses and performances of three respective cases, seeking to illuminate the ways in which death and the threat of death may participate in counter-hegemonic resistance while, also possibly reifying these extant ideologies of domination.

## Notes

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<sup>3</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1985), 13.

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<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Dauphinée, "The Politics of the Body in Pain: Reading the Ethics of Imagery," *Security Dialogue* 38, no. 2 (2007): 140, doi:10.1177/0967010607078529.

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 1, 6.

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 14.

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## **Chapter 2. The Suicide of Leelah Alcorn: Whiteness in the Cultural Wake of Dying Queers**

On December 28, 2014, transgender teenager Leelah Alcorn lay dead along Interstate 71 in rural Ohio. With the boldness and intention of someone who had clearly resigned her fate, Alcorn stepped in front of an oncoming semi-trailer near Union Township at 2:30 in the morning. Hours earlier, Alcorn had queued her suicide note for publication on her Tumblr blog. “If you are reading this,” her note began, “it means that I have committed suicide...Please don’t be sad, it’s for the better.”<sup>1</sup> The seething polemic chronicled years of abuse at the hands of her parents and the conversion therapists to whom her parents subjected her. Alcorn wrote, “My mom started taking me to a therapist, but would only take me to christian [sic] therapists, (who were all very biased) so I never actually got the therapy I needed to cure me of my depression. I only got more christians [sic] telling me that I was selfish and wrong and that I should look to God for help.”<sup>2</sup> Alcorn, through her note, made manifest the trauma associated with her time in gender and conversion therapies.

The death and cultural wake of Leelah Alcorn was a focal point in queer agitation throughout 2015. For example, Andrew Gelwicks noted that “Leelah has become synonymous with the devastating loneliness a trans teen can endure.”<sup>3</sup> With this claim, Gelwicks affirmed the sentiment that many primarily white queer activists would soon adopt. Leelah would become a symbol and martyr for the newest battleground undertaken in the fight for queer rights, the dismantling of conversion therapies as practiced on U.S. queer youths. In death, Alcorn elicited nationwide calls for “Leelah’s Law,” a federal law that would criminalize all gender and sexual conversion therapies on U.S. queer youths. Founded upon outdated pseudo-science that presumed same-sex attraction or gendered body dysphoria was immoral, conversion therapies attempted to reverse one’s unwanted sexuality or gender expression through psychoanalytic

therapy, prayer and spiritual intervention, electrotherapy, hormone and drug therapy, and surgery. Under the auspices of “Leelah’s Law,” hundreds of thousands of primarily white queer activists mobilized nationwide. Before being deleted from her online blog by her parents, Alcorn’s suicide note was shared by over 200,000 people online while thousands more held vigil across the United States.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, over 350,000 people signed a petition on change.org calling for the enactment of “Leelah’s Law,” which eventually garnered a response from President Obama. While “Leelah’s Law” was never implemented at the federal level, several local bodies honored Alcorn when successfully banning conversion and reparative therapies in their respective municipalities. For example, at the one-year anniversary of Alcorn’s suicide, the City of Cincinnati voted to become the second city in the country, after Washington, D.C., to ban conversion therapies on its youths. Chris Seelbach, the only openly queer member sitting on the council, memorialized Alcorn through tears: “She challenged us to make her death matter, and we’re doing just that.”<sup>5</sup>

I read Gelwicks’ claim that Alcorn was “synonymous” with trans and queer youth across the nation as one undergirded by a liberal logic of a white queer innocence—a similar innocence used to paint murdered queers such as Matthew Shepard and Brandon Teena as martyrs within the U.S. queer imaginary.<sup>6</sup> Put another way, Alcorn’s cultural wake became racialized, repositioning her death as a national tragedy through repeated rhetorical appeals to a Whiteness-derived innocence. Consider that in the same month of Alcorn’s suicide, Keymori Shatoya Johnson, a black transgender woman, was the twelfth transgender woman of color reported murdered in 2014. In this way, Alcorn’s death by suicide accrues meaning against a backdrop of queer and racialized injustices against queer and transgender people of color. In this chapter, I am interested in how the suicide of Alcorn rose into national consciousness at the end of 2014,

symbolically engendering the violence committed against a seemingly unified transgender community. I suggest hegemonic queer grief imbued Alcorn with a posthumous rhetorical agency in ways that made responsible queer and non-queer adults to take action against gender and sexual conversion therapies on U.S. queer youths. Additionally, performances of queer grief surrounding the death of Alcorn specifically and conversion therapies generally obfuscate the material conditions in which many queer and transgender people of color find themselves. The myopic scope of white grief in Alcorn's cultural wake lent an urgency to critiques from queers of color, many of whom used the wake of Alcorn to unhinge logics of white supremacy while also laboring to grieve their own dead in more public ways.

In this essay, I advance a richer critical understanding of queer grief in public culture while taking up Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's call for critical scholars of human communication to "excavate the rhetorical maze of confusing, apparently ambivalent answers"<sup>7</sup> to the operatives of whiteness within the queer civic and legal imaginaries. Toward these ends, I advance a queer of color critique of Alcorn's cultural wake that challenges critical scholars of queer life and death to examine the operatives of whiteness that constitute posthumous rhetorical agency. My argument lies at the important convergence of queer of color criticism, public policy, and the exigence of public death in the national imaginary.

To substantiate these claims, I first introduce queer of color critique as a heuristic with which to engage the public archive of Alcorn's cultural wake. Next, I turn to contextualize grief as a modality of rhetorical agency within the queer imaginary. My subsequent analysis is composed in two parts. The first part focuses on the initial onset of protest rhetorics after Alcorn's death, rhetorics characterized by repeated appeals to a white innocence that worked to vilify Alcorn's parents and religious dogma while casting Alcorn as a cultural martyr around

which White queers could organize. The second part examines rhetorics produced by queer and transgender people of color as they worked to unhinge hegemonic grieving practices that overwhelmingly immortalized white queer victims of hate crimes (i.e., Alcorn) within the U.S. queer imaginary. In my analysis, I use the term queer of color to refer to a variety of racialized sexualities. While some scholars levy critiques against the term for homogenizing racial subjectivities,<sup>8</sup> I invoke the term to: 1) resist the centering of whiteness as it occurs through phrases such as “non-white,” and 2) acknowledge that Alcorn’s wake garnered a response from Latinx, Asian-American, and Black queer communities. Activists in these communities performed public emotionality to grieve their own dead in more public ways, effectively writing and performing their own counterarchive of those lost to anti-queer and racist-based trauma. Finally, I conclude by ruminating on the theoretical implications of the politics of grievability in queer contexts.

### **On Queer of Color Critique and the Ethics of White Queer Liberalism**

The theoretical and methodological commitments of queer of color criticism are particularly helpful in excavating the operatives of Whiteness in Alcorn’s cultural wake. Queer of color critique refers to a broad swath of critical materialist commitments that unhinge the ways in which “liberal ideology occludes the intersecting saliency of race, gender, sexuality, and class in forming social practices.”<sup>9</sup> At the level of method, Roderick Ferguson defines queer of color criticism as the

Interrogat[ion] of social formations at the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class, with particular attention in how those formations correspond with and diverge from nationalist ideals and practices. Queer of color analysis is a heterogeneous enterprise



made up of woman of color feminism, materialist analysis, poststructuralist theory, and queer critique.<sup>10</sup>

Queer of color critique notes the ways that liberal appeals to the state work to determine and produce racial difference<sup>11</sup> while simultaneously obfuscating the ways in which those appeals to the state excludes racial and sexual minorities.<sup>12</sup> Queer of color critique emerged in what was the racist crisis of liberal whiteness in both queer scholarship and the gay rights movement. Allison Reed explains how “progress narratives easily let race slide into sexuality, as current demands for legal rights presume that the civil rights movement marked an end to racial injustice, making way for ‘colorblind’ rhetorics that focus centrally on gender and sexuality.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, to focus centrally on gender and sexuality while eliding race and ethnicity centers whiteness; hence, gesturing toward the urgency of a queer of color critique.

The contemporary white gay rights movement emerged from a more radical charge for queer liberation. Critical communication scholars have noted the ways in which “conservative sexual ideologies”<sup>14</sup> (i.e., rights acquisition vis-à-vis marriage equality and federal hate crime protections) are predicated upon liberal appeals to the nation-state. Such appeals manifest in myriad ways but are characterized largely through an “emphasis on conventional political channels, consumer practices, and conservative enactments of queer identity as the appropriate mechanisms for change” coupled with “entrenchment in the contemporary circuitries of republican governance and commerce.”<sup>15</sup>

I situate calls for “Leelah’s Law” within the broader history of normative liberal queer assimilation wherein the possibility of queer rights is inextricably tethered to grief-laden appeals to the nation-state and the broad regime of state-sanctioned violence. The yoking of law and grief is a central tenet in the current political climate. In many ways, “law helps to give meaning to death and mourning, establishing rules that require a clear demarcation of the boundary between

life and death, tell us what we can and cannot do with the remains of the dead, and create privileges and disabilities for survivors.”<sup>16</sup> For example, the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act added sexual orientation and gender identity to the list of federally defined hate crimes which allowed local law enforcement significant federal resources to investigate and prosecute hate-motivated incidents.

### **Grief and Innocence in the Queer Imaginary**

Children, as a social category, are distinct from adults in that they are perceived as fundamentally innocent and therefore in need of parental protection.<sup>17</sup> Previously, children were believed to be born inherently flawed, made evident through the acquisition of original sin at the moment of birth. Seventeenth-century philosopher John Locke argues, however, that children begin life with a blank slate and that their innocence must be protected. More recently, Gary Cross suggests that as a nation, we have a vested interest in preserving the innocence of today’s youth, for they represent a cherished world free from the calculating domain of capitalism.<sup>18</sup> Because of their perceived innocence, children, whether actual or figurative, mobilize emergency claims more so than adults. In a neoliberal imaginary, adults shoulder all of the responsibility for their problems, while children are not responsible; instead, adults are responsible for them.

But, while the figurative child “remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics,”<sup>19</sup> a sense of parental obligation toward a figure of youth is not guaranteed. Rather, parental obligation is shaped by a cultural logic of whose life is worth living and whose innocence is worth preserving.<sup>20</sup> For example, Erica Meriners argues “child-saving” discourses emerge within the racialized contexts of social, political, and economic struggles and are used to justify increased police surveillance, mass incarceration, the restriction of First Amendment rights, transphobia, and same-sex marriage discrimination.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, James Kincaid suggests

that child-saving discourses are not value-neutral but are often “weaponized to assault adulthood, sophistication, rational moderation, and judicious adjustment to the ways of the world.”<sup>22</sup> In myriad ways, the figurative or literal child regulates contemporary civic life. Taken together, the child is a fundamentally white and heteronormative figure whose protection requires compounding state violence. It is in this vein that I position the figure of the child as a focal point in queer of color critique.

Moreover, one’s parental and civic responsibility to youth is predicated on the symbolic construction of a racialized white innocence of youth and purity. Black youth, however, have rarely been the protagonists in narratives of innocence. For example, Wilma King maps how chattel slavery effectively effaced any sense of childhood and innocence for black children. King describes how “enslaved children had virtually no childhood because they entered the workplace early and were subjected to arbitrary authority, punishment, and separation, just as enslaved adults were.”<sup>23</sup> In the shadows of chattel slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and mass incarceration, black youth are still not afforded the presumption of innocence. Phillip Atiba Goff et. al, found compelling evidence that young black boys “are seen as older and less innocent and that they prompt a less essential conception of childhood than do their white same-age peers.”<sup>24</sup> Moreover, Erica Meiners suggests that institutionalized Eurocentric pedagogy functions as “ideological management,” effectively funneling youths of color from the classroom into prison and jail.<sup>25</sup> Taken together, the racialized presumptions of innocence are undergirded by logics of a whiteness-informed youth.

The connection between grief and politics is deeply enmeshed within the fabric of American civic society. Grief, to borrow a phrase, may be best understood as an archive of feeling.<sup>26</sup> Billie Murray explains that expressions of grief, when made public, function as a form

of public argument in times of profound crisis.<sup>27</sup> For example, Cram demonstrates how holding public vigils to demonstrate collective grief radically “enacts a politics of witnessing.”<sup>28</sup> The struggle to grieve publicly one’s dead is, in many ways, inextricably bound within the vices of white supremacy: as David McIvor argues, grief, like mourning “is inescapably a part of politics because politically, just as much as individually, we are what (or who) we mourn.”<sup>29</sup> So while the experience of grief is assuredly one of the greatest costs of being human, the enactment of one’s grief vis-à-vis mourning is arguably undergirded in the United States by logics of civility, which, in turn, are based upon operatives of whiteness. For example, C. Kyle Rudick and Kathryn Golsan argue that civility “is a racialized, rather than universal, norm.”<sup>30</sup> As civil norms determine appropriate grieving practices, I suggest that performances of grievability of the nation’s youth function in public life to enable and constrain rhetorical agency for particularly raced bodies.

To exemplify the role public performance of grief assumes in American civic life, I turn to the death of Matthew Shepard. In his wake, hegemonic grief concretized this young man into the queer imaginary. But queers of color who are disproportionately victims of hate crimes, as well as state-sanctioned violence, rarely ever achieve the national attention their white counterparts do. For example, Ott and Aoki describe the appeal of Shepard’s murder:

He looked like an all-American nice kid next door who’d look after your grandmother if you went out of town. He looked like a sweet kid and he was.” Shepard was “white and middle-class,” “barely on the threshold of adulthood,” and “frail [in] appearance.” Because of his slight stature, a mere 5’2”, and “cherubic face” even those uncomfortable with homosexuality saw him as an innocent (that is, sexually nonthreatening) victim. The public identified with Shepard, viewing him as friend and son.<sup>31</sup>

It follows that white queers such as Shepard who are culturally read as more innocent and in need of protection become patron saints of queer struggle and, through their martyrdom, guide national policies for the protection of primarily white queers. I suggest that cultural codes of

queer innocence are inextricably bound up within hegemonic assumptions of a whiteness-informed innocence.

### **The Operatives of Whiteness: Alcorn's Innocence and Grievability**

Alcorn's death by suicide beckoned a national tragedy for several interrelated reasons. Chief among them were the successful construction of Alcorn as an innocent youth, the use of Alcorn's politicized death to cast Alcorn as representative of all queer and transgender youth, and the appeals to hegemonic motherhood which cast both queer and non-queer adults as responsible for the loss of Alcorn's innocence.

First, from the moment Alcorn's suicide became national news, activists and journalists emphasized her youth in myriad ways. Many corporate mass-media news articles began with and spent much time discussing Alcorn's exact age, seventeen, or her adolescence as a "teenager."<sup>32</sup> For example, *the Associated Press*, *NBC News*, *In These Times*, *CNN*, *Think Progress*, *Time*, *People*, *Boston Globe*, *Daily Mail*, *ABC News*, and *the Washington Post* all, in their headlines, referred to Alcorn as a teen, teenager, or child. Introducing Alcorn through the lens of childhood worked to heighten the complicity of adults in Alcorn's death.

Second, true to the operatives of whiteness, Alcorn's race went unchecked and undiscussed, which allowed corporate news media to frame the public emotionality as representative of a seemingly unified queer experience. Richard Dyer argues that both whiteness and white people serve as synecdoche for all of humanity and it is through this ubiquity that whiteness "reproduces itself regardless of inattention, power differences and goodwill."<sup>33</sup> For example, several national, international, and LGBTQ+ news outlets claimed her suicide was a catalyst for a seemingly unified transgender movement of rights and recognition.<sup>34</sup> The *Independent* described Alcorn's suicide as "triggering widespread anguish and raising a debate

about the rights of transgender people.” The *Advocate* simply claimed “a massive outpouring of grief erupted” in Alcorn’s remembrance. *Pink News* wrote of “the transgender community” as one monolithic collective. *Time* described them as simply “advocates.” While the account of those affected by Alcorn’s wake seems objectively descriptive, I argue that the mediated homogenization of queer responses as unified and collective worked to re-center not only the plight of affluent queer suburbia specifically but also whiteness generally.

Many of the activists, journalists, and politicians grounded their arguments in Alcorn’s own parting words politicizing her own suicide. “My death needs to mean something,” she wrote. “My death needs to be counted in the number of transgender people who commit suicide this year. I want someone to look at that number and say “that’s f\*\*\*ed up” and fix it. Fix society. Please.”<sup>35</sup> Heeding her words as an explicit call to action, queer activists used her suicide note as a legislative focal point as they called for the enactment of “Leelah’s Law.” A petition for “Leelah’s Law,” which sought to “immediately seek a pathway for banning the practice known as ‘transgender conversion therapy’” was posted on change.org.<sup>36</sup> The petition claims “‘conversion therapies’ have been documented to cause great harms and in this case, Leelah’s death.” The politicization of Alcorn’s own suicide as well as the rhetoric of and surrounding the petition worked through registers of whiteness. Put another way, conditioned by liberal child-saving logics, the politics of Alcorn’s grievability was one manifest through her inscribed whiteness.

In summation, one need not diminish the cruelty of conversion therapy practices any more than one need to denigrate the importance of marriage rights for some queer people; however, prioritizing reparative therapy as a primary queer battleground again, as with marriage, privileges white, middle-class, and affluent experiences over others. For example, Marita

Sturken, writing on mourning practices surrounding the historical HIV/AIDS epidemic, asks, “is it a privilege to be able to mourn in the middle of an epidemic?”<sup>37</sup> In her question, Sturken gestures toward the politics of grievability in a historically racialized struggle. “Most organizations struggling to deal with AIDS in inner-city Black and Latino communities,” argues Sturken, “do not have the energy or resources” for holding vigil, engaging in communal remembrance, or energizing for collective change. As queer people of color continue to fall victim to structures of racism including mass incarceration, police brutality, abject poverty, murder with impunity, and insurmountable employment discrimination, the martyrdom of Alcorn and the vilification of conversion therapies represents a national queer mobilization that in effect re-centers whiteness.

While mass-media news accounts failed to acknowledge the racialized dimension of Alcorn’s wake, the way her whiteness informed her grievability was made evident through two distinct relationalities: first, the deliberation over motherhood and culpability surrounding Carla Alcorn, and second, the contextualization of Alcorn’s suicide within conservative religious doctrine. Through focusing on the two aforementioned relationalities, queer activists sought to challenge the distinction between suicide and murder. Alcorn’s defenders claimed that Alcorn was not only victim to circumstance but victim to abusive parents and abusive religious doctrine—that is, in many ways, Alcorn’s parents *killed* her. Through organizing around a “bad mother” and the church, queer activists galvanized, effectively naming the dismantling of gender therapies as the next queer battleground.

### **Maternal Surrogacy and Parental Sins**

The cultural wake of Alcorn highlighted ideological struggles over motherhood generally and the role mothers play in the aftermath of dead youth specifically. That is to say, Alcorn

became grievable through framing her as a symbolically orphaned youth. Opposition to this framing by queers of color activists was abundant as I detail later. Yet, the symbolic invocation of good and bad mothers in the wake of a dead youth offers insight into how “symbolic motherhood”<sup>38</sup> frames the appropriation of dead and dying youth at the national level. For example, Stephanie Hartzell describes how in addition to bearing the literal responsibility for birthing and raising future generations, “mothers traditionally have been held responsible for the ideological imperative to nurture ideal U.S. citizens.”<sup>39</sup> Because of this imperative placed on literal or symbolic mother figures, mothers can mobilize emergency claims in times of crisis. For instance, Mori Boor Toon argues that “maternal roles [are] particularly apt rhetorical strategies for female...agitators because agitation and mothering often share two essential dimensions: nurturing and militancy.”<sup>40</sup> Yet a mothering ethos is informed and limited by the interlocking oppressions of misogyny, racism, and class-based inequalities. Patricia Hill Collins explains that “racial domination and economic exploitation profoundly shape the mothering context, not only for racial ethnic women in the United States, but for all women.”<sup>41</sup> Thus, the idealized performative model of motherhood is one enacted by a presumably white, American, middle-class woman bound with logics of autonomy and self-madness.<sup>42</sup> In the other words, both the appealing to one’s own and the framing of another’s mothering ethos is determined by the cultural logics of a liberal hegemonic whiteness. Moreover, the fact that the deceased teen’s mother, Carla Alcorn, was targeted within national discourse more so than the father, Doug Alcorn, is consequential. Obligating Carla Alcorn to the moral and maternal demands of white motherhood while leaving the father relatively unscathed is a deeply rooted practice of misogyny in American public life wherein motherhood becomes a “site of political struggle”<sup>43</sup> over women and mothering bodies.



*On Maternal Surrogacy.* As the cultural wake of Alcorn was characterized by the twin crises of her death and the violence of conversion therapies, rhetors digitally enacted a maternal surrogacy ethos to effectively elicit mass identification with the recently deceased. Mary Moss, a frequent op-ed contributor to *The Huffington Post*, offers a posthumous open apology letter to Alcorn expressing regret that Alcorn did not reach out to her personally. Moss wrote that

I would have replied to you Leelah that you were a beautiful young lady and that even if your mother couldn't find it in her heart to support you that I would support you and love you. I would have told you that you matter and to please not to give up. I need kids out there who are transgender and their parents to please know I am there for them.<sup>44</sup>

Moss' open letter is filled with rhetorical and performative implications. In situating herself against the neglectful mother as a surrogate mother to a rhetorically orphaned Alcorn, Moss fits the trope of the sympathetic, maternal caregiver to a needing child. Such a discourse itself performs a heteronormative iteration of motherhood that calls attention to the violence endured by an innocent youth. Yet through Moss's appeal to a mothering ethos, she works to elicit a mass identification between the public and Alcorn. Moss's open letter offers insight into the power of maternal appeals in activist rhetoric, but it also exposes the double-bind of such discourse; to be legible in the public sphere, mothers must agitate both within and outside extant ideologies of motherhood.<sup>45</sup>

Like other mothers writing in the wake of their children's deaths, Moss repeatedly referenced a maternal persona by introducing herself as a "proud mom" and signing the letter as a "feisty single mom." The construction of Moss as a "grieving mother" re-centered Alcorn's vulnerability to abuse at the hands of her elders. Moss writes,

I need you to know that: I am sorry. I am so very sorry that you didn't have the love and support from your parents you so richly deserved. I am sorry that there wasn't someone you felt you could turn to. I am sorry that you felt isolated and alone. I am sorry that you felt you had no hope. I am sorry that your parents couldn't see past their own ignorance to embrace their daughter instead of condemning her. I want to be angry at your parents

and condemn them right back. I want to yell at them and scold them harshly as they scolded you. I want to tell them that they can have their religious beliefs and still love and support their child.

Here, Moss enacts a mothering ethos that obfuscates the relationships between beliefs and rights. Arguably, the Alcorns could not hold their conservative religious beliefs in a consistent way and support the trans-ness of their daughter. When Moss assumes that they can, rather than actually challenge the beliefs themselves, she engages a distinct normative, liberal and undeniably white middle-class logic that presumes one can hold anti-rights views without violating the fundamental rights of another.

*On Parental Sins.* A second element of parental discourse in Alcorn's wake found expression in the judgment of the perceived crimes of the Alcorns. Activists used the exigence of this minor's death to call for charges to be brought against the Alcorns. In this way, activists deployed a normative liberal queer ethos through calling on the state to address injustices. For proponents of Leelah's Law, Alcorn's politicized death in many ways compounded the distinction between suicide and murder. It was apparent that Leelah did not kill herself; rather, her abusive parents killed her. For example, *Back2Stonewall* compiled together a string of tweets from political gay rights activist Dan Savage wherein he publically called for charges to be brought against the Alcorns and the conversion therapists she was forced to visit.<sup>46</sup> The tweets read:

"If Tyler Clemente's roommate could be prosecuted – and he was – then the parents of #LeelahAlcorn can & should be"

"The 'Christian therapists' who counseled #LeelahAlcorn should also be charged."

"#LeelahAlcorn's parents threw her in front of that truck. They should be ashamed – but 1st they need to be shamed. Charges should be brought."

By naming the Alcorns as an evil around which queers could organize, activists could channel their anger and rage at a concrete enemy while leveraging for rights acquisition, in this case

protection from conversion therapies. Through criminalizing and vilifying the Alcorns, rhetors such as Savage mobilized posthumous child-saving discourses and ultimately grieve a child they could not save. Alcorn's martyrdom was constituted through discourses that criminalized and vilified her parents, effectively casting her as an innocent youth who suffered endlessly under abusive parents. Savage, and other online activists like him who are white, are incredibly vocal as they call for carceral solutions to the death of a white transgender teenager. While white folks are more likely to benefit from the structure of the carceral state and view the state, police, and incarceration as viable options, carceral solutions are far less legitimate for queer and transgender people of color.<sup>47</sup>

Queer artists were also quick to appropriate the death of Alcorn as they tried to make sense of the teen's untimely end at the hands of her seemingly abusive parents. For example, YouTube user Maddie Morley wrote and composed an original lyrical ballad to lament Alcorn. Morley, over a somber piano accompaniment, laments, "You murdered your daughter and you show no remorse / Then you hide behind a cross, of course / 'Cause you think your religion is a license to hate / and an excuse to discriminate."<sup>48</sup> Morley, like Moss, engages in an investment of normative parenting and claims, "Don't pretend that you're sad / You're not a mom and dad / 'Cause you murdered your daughter / For the son you never had."<sup>49</sup> The song constitutes an artistic response to the Alcorns while also complicating the distinction between suicide and murder. Morley suggests that the Alcorns were able to justify the abuse and murder of Leelah because of their religious beliefs. Taken together, the nation was allowed to grieve Alcorn because the Alcorns were demonstrably evil. In this way, Leelah's death made evident the horrors of a youth abused. Queers of color would later engage in an oppositional politics in response to such figurations of Alcorn's suicide, effectively calling into question the

fundamental differences between queer suicide and murder, a discourse I analyze in the following section.

Yet while several queer activists were quick to advocate criminal charges against the Alcorns, others were markedly more reticent in their figuration of justice. For example, Meghan Daum (a heterosexual married cisgender woman) suggested in an op-ed in the *LA Times* that queer rage directed at the Alcorns in the wake of Alcorn's death was equivalent to and just as violent as the crimes of the Alcorns. Daum wrote:

Let's be real. Although the Alcorns may have been tragically misguided, there is no evidence they deliberately set out to harm their child. It likely wasn't their transphobia that led to Leelah's death but, rather, their failure to see her as a person separate from them, their refusal to recognize her horizontal self. And while you may think such a refusal defines transphobia, it's just as accurate to say that shaming the parents is rooted in the same kind of bigotry and discomfort around difference that drove their lethal mistakes.<sup>50</sup>

In this, Daum parallels the actions of the Alcorns (sending their daughter to conversion therapies and socially isolating her for months) with the actions of queers who spoke out against such injustices, arguing that both were rooted in “the same kind of bigotry.” The logic follows that calling out the injustices committed against a victimized group is an attack on the victimizer. This discourse constitutes a unique form of reverse victimization that not only humanizes the Alcorns but also renders those who question their parenting uncivil and bigoted. Reverse victimization, describes Mack, is the symbolic process through which “dominant groups take on a victimized posture, switching places with previously defined minority groups (whose claim to victim-status is empirically more reasonable.)”<sup>51</sup>

Similarly, a personal blogger named Serena victimizes Carla as opposed to “Joshua” in a post titled, titled, “I Stand with Carla Alcorn” Serena claims, “The real injustice lies in the hate-infused outcry against a grieving mother. From the call to bring charges of neglect to death

threats, Carla Alcorn, mother of Joshua Ryan Alcorn, is being persecuted for her faith. That is the real injustice.”<sup>52</sup> Writing from a rightist, traditional Judeo-Christian logic, Serena holds that conservatives on the right have been and continue to be victimized by the radically queer left. For example, Serena claims that “The LGBT community quickly snatched the story and claimed their martyr. For a week they have exploited this tragedy. They have used the loss to attack Christian, biblical family values. They have dehumanized and vilified his mother in the process.”<sup>53</sup> In this, Serena upholds the innocence of both Carla and the religious doctrine to which the Alcorns subscribed.

Another striking characteristic of the discourse in support of the Alcorns was the degree to which both non-queer and some queer activists used respectability politics to discipline national queer rage in the wake of Leelah’s death, albeit in different ways. For example, Meghan Daum writes:

There's no question that Leelah's death and the circumstances leading to it are worthy of — and, in fact, demand — public rage. But along with that rage should come compassion, not just for the Alcorns but for anyone who's ever been slow to reach acceptance, or whose circumscribed worldview has clouded their understanding of somebody else's experience.

The disciplining of queer rage has long been a mainstay in contemporary and historical queer agitation. Rooted in a politics of respectability, Daum represents a normative ethos which suggests rage and violence are ineffective modalities of protest, as they often seek to overturn unjust ideologies as opposed to appealing to them. Similarly, queer journalist Evan Urquhart warns of the dangers in calling for criminal charges against the Alcorns, writing “If activists and allies buy into the narrative of enmity and strife, there is a risk of fueling the very fire we most wish to see extinguished. Calling for criminal charges against grieving Christian parents seems, to me, to be the sort of thing we might want to take a moment to think about before we commit

to it as a strategy.”<sup>54</sup> Taken together, both Daum and Urquhart frame the calls for charges of abuse and negligence against the Alcorns as lacking “compassion” and engaging in “strife.” Both exemplify the civil disciplining of queer responses in periods of immense queer crises.

The disciplining of rage, emotion, and affect within the public sphere, while assuredly political in nature is also a modality of racism. Making claims regarding the place of rage within activism engages in logics of civility which in turn are undergirded by logics of race. Rudick and Golsan explain how normative instantiations of civility reproduce white supremacy through centering race-evasion rhetorics and excluding people of color from public spheres.<sup>55</sup> While white activists “infight” about who is causing who strife, the disciplining of appropriate emotion not only excludes people of color from the public deliberation of whose life is worthy of remembering, but also asks activists to recenter their own whiteness and the whiteness of the people they are grieving.

### **The Vexed Horrors of Religious Conversion Therapies.**

Additionally, a range of texts circulated within the public archive effectively render both religious ideology generally and religious institutions specifically culpable for the death of Leelah Alcorn. For example, Phaylen Fairchild speculates that

A major factor in Leelah’s decision to take her own life was the rejection she faced from her religious parents who wanted to force her into conversion therapy. The constant challenges and attempts to control the way she represented herself incurred tremendous damage to her confidence and ability to love herself as she was.

Fairchild’s discourse works to depathologize Alcorn’s feelings of suicidality and instead position them as a direct response to religiously intolerant doctrine. In this way, Fairchild understands Alcorn as a child who failed to reckon with traditional understandings of gendered possibilities and the life imagined through radical self-love. Additionally, Brynn Tannehill vilified not only the church but also all those who finance its operations. She argues:

If you belong to a religion that denies transgender identities and put money in the collection plate or pay your 10 percent tithe, you are bankrolling the slaughter of innocents. You can claim you love LGBT people all day, but as long as you're footing the bill for propaganda that's literally killing children, you are an accessory.<sup>56</sup>

In mapping the flow of money from tithe offerings into the church and into conversion therapies, Tannehill compels her readers to grasp the concept of indirect responsibility. Tannehill works to make complicit not only the administrators of conversion therapies but also those who indirectly fund the practice through their weekly tithe offerings.

Taken at face value, critiquing the assuredly real and deeply felt pain and trauma of conversion therapies seems vexed. Yet however perversely it may seem, I argue that the rhetorical emphasis on conversion therapies is a function and marker of privilege. I do not wish to claim that being forced into conversion therapy is in and of itself a form of privilege; rather, I argue that the public outrage surrounding the practice is best understood, through a materialist class-based perspective, as a signal of not only Alcorn's class and social standing but of the material interests of those outraged in Alcorn's wake. Conversion therapy was an option and resource because they were white, middle class, and ensconced in an affluent community of worship. The dominant narrative of the injustices committed by the Alcorns and the church fails to account for the ways in which being able to afford such therapies is in and of itself a marker of privilege. Failing to account for the material access to these therapies highlights the ways in which queer political agenda-making often obfuscates the plight of queer and transgender people of color who disproportionately struggle with homelessness, underemployment, police harassment, and mass incarceration. Thus, metaphorizing the evils of conversion therapy as an absolute evil around which queers must organize fails to account for the material terrain of queer injustice. For example, Fallon Fox, writing for *Time*, laments that

while we as Americans denounce the cruelty of other countries that engage in torture—

and our own—the cries of tortured transgender children in this country have fallen upon deaf ears because of bigotry and religious beliefs that have zero place being inserted into anything resembling mental health therapy. Conversion therapy is unconscionable. It should rightfully be called what it is: child abuse.

Fox likens Alcorn’s parents to war criminals engaging in the killing and abuse of children overseas. In casting a domestic family wealthy enough to afford conversion therapies as war criminals, Fox analogizes two forms of torture in a way that obfuscates the material relations undergirding both, privileging white bodies at the expense of other racialized subjectivities.

Moreover, Mara Keisling argues that

it [conversion therapy] is a huge epidemic that is so absolutely horribly outrageous. What Leelah has given us is a real way to individualize this crisis that we are having with transgender people, especially transgender youth who are being so marginalized, so alienated. We know this happens so frequently. Sometimes the kids survive. Too often, they don’t.<sup>57</sup>

Through individualizing Alcorn in the “horribly outrageous” and “huge epidemic of conversion therapy,” Keisling works to humanize not only Alcorn but presumably all queer youth who are subject to such therapies.

While whiteness and race aren’t implicitly foregrounded or addressed in the critiques emanating from white folks who agitated in Alcorn’s wake, the fundamental ethos of whiteness is present nonetheless. That it went unchecked, unmarked, and unexamined by those who were certainly concerned with identity politics (e.g. transgender identities) attests to the nature of whiteness and white supremacy. Thomas Nakayama and Robert Krizek note how whiteness is a strategic rhetoric insofar as it circulates through being unmarked and uninterrogated.<sup>58</sup> In foregrounding liberal logics that appeal to the state for redress, relying on systems of incarceration, and eliding altogether race in deliberation regarding identity politics, the hegemonic cultural wake of Alcorn’s suicide accrues meaning against a systemic backdrop of white supremacy’s role in public emotionality.



Having now analyzed the character of discourse concretizing Alcorn as a bonafide queer martyr, I turn to a study of how queers of color used Alcorn's wake, a critical discursive moment, to critique the quick appropriation of Alcorn's death while working to grieve their own dead in more public ways.

### **The Racialized Terrain of Queer Grief and Death**

In Alcorn's wake, a queer of color counterarchival critique emerged to unhinge whiteness and its prevailing logics of grievability. The repertoire of political performance and polemic discourse demanded attention, narrated deaths within their communities, and engaged in oppositional politics within the context of cultural grieving politics. Their efforts largely transformed the meaning of Alcorn's suicide from a normative, universal queer injustice to one predicated largely upon the insidious elevation of white victims of hate crimes into emblems of white queer purity. Their efforts occurred in both digital contexts and on the streets. In the section that follows, I map them both.

A primary element of queer of color critique is feminist and queer online call-out discourse. As a feminist and queer deliberative discourse, call-out culture is a source of controversy among those agitating for gender, sexual, and racial justice. Opponents of call-out culture suggest that it is toxic and problematic<sup>59</sup> and enables "armchair and academic brand[s] of activism."<sup>60</sup> Other activists suggest that in its original deployment, calling out was a strategy of survival for those who were both racially and sexually subordinated. Trans writer Riley H maps the contemporary development of call-out discourse as a particular feminist and race-based argumentative style and last resort of black femmes who were repeatedly harassed with rape and death threats on the microblogging website Tumblr. The "hypervisibility" of the website's aggregate posts, argues Riley, "allowed multiple people to watch, in detail, from beginning to

end, how something that seemed okay to white sensibilities quickly devolved into racism.”<sup>61</sup> It is in this spirit that I read the tactics used by the queer-of-color counterpublic arguments in the wake of Alcorn’s martyrdom.

To begin, I cite Eunbyul Lee, an Asian-American and nonbinary activist. Lee puts it bluntly:

Before we continue, I want to call us out. I want to call out everybody who has readily acted in honor of Leelah but so effortlessly failed to recognize Islan, Alejandra, Tiffany, Jennifer, Gizzy, Zoraida, Kandy, and Yaz’min. As a trans person, I want to help end violence against trans people, but I need us to destroy the racism embedded in the making of trans legacies.<sup>62</sup>

Lee’s callout critiques whiteness and those who remain invested in its logics of grievability.

Lee’s call out gestures toward what is really at stake in the politics of grievability. In a move attending to the rhetorical difficulty of calling out another’s assuredly deeply and personally felt loss, Lee chooses to begin with “us,” effectively implicating herself alongside their intended audience. Moreover, in listing the salvo of transgender women of color whose murders never made national news, Lee foregrounds how grievability culture functions in public life by effectively constraining the rhetorical agency of many queers of color in death. Lee’s choice to name publicly the victims of anti-race and -queer based murders adopts the feminist and intersectional ethos of the #SayHerName movement. Initially used as a Twitter hashtag to highlight black women who were victims of police murder, the #SayHerName movement was soon adopted to foreground the ways in which anti-black violence is a lived reality in all black subjectivities regardless of gender or sexuality.<sup>63</sup> Lee establishes solidarity (through claiming a trans/queer identity) before pivoting and suggesting that the violence committed against queer and transgender people of color is more than material but also symbolic through the form of hegemonic grieving practices.

Central to the counterpublic's discourse is the recurrent need to counter the unmarking of Alcorn's race—a logic that perpetuates cultural codes of white supremacy. Activists such as Asam Ahmad, Eunybul Lee, and Parker Marie Molloy all labored to insist that Alcorn's whiteness was a, if not *the*, determining factor in her cultural wake. Many queers symbolically redefined Alcorn's whiteness from something racially neutral to something highly politicized. For example, Asam Ahmad suggests:

Leelah's face telegraphs the kind of painful innocence, inseparable from both her whiteness and her youth, that is necessary for an appropriate martyr the LGBTQ community can rally behind. Whiteness has always functioned as a marker of both universality and innocence, in the very same way that Blackness is automatically associated with criminality and guilt.<sup>64</sup>

Ahmad characterizes Alcorn in a way that pivots her whiteness from being an indescribable neutrality to that which affords her active agency not only in life but also in death. Ahmad's words suggest that the construction of whiteness is symbolically linked to depictions of innocence that have material consequences in the grievability of racialized lives. Moreover, whiteness, constructed in and through logics of innocence, becomes enthymematically linked to prevailing notions of vulnerability.

Like Ahmad, Molloy works to locate Alcorn's whiteness, but in this case in the context of hegemonic, Eurocentric white beauty standards. She writes that

Leelah was white, came from a middle-class family, and had media-friendly looks and skill with words. When you look at the stories of those like Islan Nettles, Zoraida Reyes, Yazmin Vash Payne, or Penny Proud, the pattern is impossible to ignore. Yes, these women were all victims of violence, either by homicide or suicide; but unlike Leelah, the other victims were women of color, and if the dearth of media attention is any indication, less valuable to society.<sup>65</sup>

Molloy is correct when she claims that the “pattern is impossible to ignore:” Alcorn was afforded the privilege of her whiteness-informed youthfulness made evident through the widespread sharing of her personal selfies excavated from her online archive. In this way, visual argument functioned heavily in the dissemination of her cultural wake.

Other narratives from activists foreground the difficulty in engaging in oppositional politics in the context of a bereaving public. For example, Lee reframes white supremacy to account for the myriad ways in which hegemonic whiteness effaces the trauma it inflicts upon racialized communities. They write

I have encountered many white trans people who fail to recognize how their combined power and prejudice produce undeniably racist ideologies, as if their trans identities erase their systematic privileging over trans POC. Violence against trans POC is buried under six feet of blatant disregard while Brandon Teena, a white trans man, had two films produced in honor of his life and death. Laws are likelier to be made in honor of white trans people. In death, humanization can be a reality for white trans people. I need us to challenge the hypervisibility of a white trans tragedy, and the subsequent invisibility of the tragic deaths of trans POC. I want people to give a shit when trans POC have our voices, our histories, our lives, and our legacies stolen from us.<sup>66</sup>

Lee frames conceptions of trauma perpetuated by white supremacy as not only occurring through highly sensationalized and publicized lynching of black and brown bodies and other highly public acts of racism but also occurring through more innocuous, quotidian practices of cultural remembering. As Lee suggests, the archive of white queer pain is extensive, with queers like Brandon Teena and Matthew Shepard both concretized and memorialized within the historical queer imaginary through numerous cultural artifacts and performances such as film, documentaries, biographies, and stage works. Lee’s emphasis on Teena (who had two films made in his honor) is vividly juxtaposed with those of color who are materially and symbolically “buried” often without the same type of memory work done in their name. Moreover, the hypervisibility of white grief in the wake of white tragedies externalizes hegemonic grieving

practices which fail to honor queers of color who feel victim to atrocities of their own. The queer of color critique worked to accentuate Alcorn's middle-class family life, and that family's access to conversion therapies gestures toward the hegemonic investment in how certain trans youth live.

Taken together, the diptych of white anger in Alcorn's wake and the response by queer communities of color offer insight into how structures of oppression not only give rise to the conjuncture of queer suicide but also to the role public emotionality plays in producing rhetorics of remembrance. The response from queer people of color in Alcorn's wake throw into bold relief how the role of dominant social structures such as race, gender, sexuality, and class are constitutive of public emotionality in the public sphere. Alcorn was not just transgender, but Alcorn was also white, the product of a highly-affluent suburban family, and therefore had privilege, even in death. As activists, like Lee, place in situ the memory of Alcorn alongside the memories of Shepard and Teena, a queer of color critiques provides a deeply vexing but nonetheless needed question of should Alcorn have risen to the level of martyrdom she did given the context in which she died?

### **Toward a Reimagining of Queer Grief**

In this essay, I have argued that the cultural wake of Leelah Alcorn was mobilized and undergirded by heuristics of a whiteness-informed grief and innocence that re-centers already privileged bodies within the queer imaginary. The twin modalities of grief and innocence are necessary for the critical inquiry of discourses that circulate in the aftermath of highly public and politicized deaths by suicide. The myriad discourses that composed the archive of Alcorn's cultural wake represent the vexed terrain of grievability in the contemporary queer imaginary. While some appropriated the youth's death to agitate in the realm of public policy, others used

the appropriation of her death to critique the insidious pattern of grieving predominantly white dead queers. In doing so, this particular archive of grief and innocence illustrates how contemporary queer death still inspires the vexed twin relationalities of mourning and militancy. I've also attended to the oppositional discourses that challenged Alcorn's public wake. In many ways, Alcorn's white transgender corpse functioned as a site of struggle regarding the racial politics of queer remembrance.<sup>67</sup>

Discourses surrounding dead and dying queers in the national archive that frame specific individuals as representative of an entire group (i.e., Andrew Gelwicks' claim that "Leelah has become synonymous with the devastating loneliness a trans teen can endure"<sup>68</sup>) must be critically interrogated, as they may contribute to the broader insidious practice of effacing queers of color from the national memory. Influential sociologist Eduardo Bonillo-Silva compels critical scholars to attend to the ways in which hegemonic whiteness manifests itself in "slippery and subtle" ways.<sup>69</sup> So while queers of color are disproportionately more likely to be victims to hate crimes and mass incarceration,<sup>70</sup> hegemonic grief functions to exclude the most vulnerable of us from the public consciousness.

Moreover, appeals for "Leelah's Law," a federal corrective that would seemingly protect all queer and transgender youth from the violence of conversion therapies, must also be critically interrogated. Scholars Mack and McCann explain how "carceral feminism," as a contemporary brand of feminism, "reli[es] on state-sanctioned punitive justice as a corrective to sexual violence [while] foreclosing opportunities to recognize the various ways in which the state mobilizes our fears in order to expand and rationalize its own violence."<sup>71</sup> Similarly, Chandon Reddy explains how the expansion of federal hate crimes through the Shepard-Byrd act had a disproportionate impact on people of color, exacerbating the "advanced policing practices of the racialized liberal

state.”<sup>72</sup> Although the negative psychological impact of conversion therapies is supported in extant social scientific research, activist discourses agitating for “Leelah’s Law” failed to account for the ways in which their national mobilization abandoned a radically coalitional ethos. Queer appeals to the state, however well intentioned, can not remedy the violence enacted upon bodies of color by that very state. While white folks, like Dan Savage, are quick to call upon carceral solutions for redress, they do so uncritically aware of the disproportionately violence such institutions enact upon queer communities of color.

Toward a queer structural critique, I suggest that the politics of contemporary queer activism at the national level (i.e., nationwide mobilizations in Alcorn’s wake and calls for Leelah’s Law) need to reimagine the grievability of queer life under the radical conditions of coalitional politics. For Karma Chávez, queerness as an ethic of coalitionality “implies an intermeshed understanding of identity, subjectivity, power, and politics located on the dirt and concrete where people live, work, and play.”<sup>73</sup> While queers continue to stand at the cusp of our death, anticipating the day we run into the person who ends our lives—or worse, realizing that, if things get too bad, the person who ends our lives may be ourselves—we must recognize that not all queers experience death and its threat in the same way. Yet as queers continue to grieve those buried beneath Chávez’s dirt and concrete, the structures of grief discipline the most marginalized among us. Naming the dismantling of conversion therapies as the primary queer battleground allowed queer activists to isolate and individuate queer oppression into a single practice and, once conversion therapies become abolished, allowed for cathartic release. This politicized grief thinks through violence as “individual acts versus an epistemic force which works to support the normative and normalizing structuring of public pain.”<sup>74</sup>

While the loss of Alcorn was assuredly deeply felt, personal, and tragic for those who knew her, her suicide was of immense political consequence as it accrued a more vexed meaning as she posthumously rose to represent all transgender youth even though her martyrdom was markedly racially myopic. Her death accrues meaning against a backdrop of violent crimes committed, often with impunity, against queer and nonbinary people of color. The point here is not that Alcorn was unworthy of mourning. Clearly, she was. Rather, the lesson for critical scholars is that grievability functions in public life as a modality of white supremacy, as it both enables and constrains rhetorical agency for white racialized bodies. Through mobilizing discourses invested in normative parenthood, normative grievability, and normative lives, Alcorn's death was, in the Butlerian sense, one that mattered.

Yet in her wake, the white rage that emerged provided a rhetorical exigence for queers of color as they worked to unhinge prevailing notions of queer grievability. Despite never receiving national attention, the queer of color critique illuminated the ways in which insidious mourning practices fail to account for the dead and dying queers of color who rarely ever achieve the level of martyrdom of the Shepards, Teenas, and Alcorns. In bringing to light the ways in which queer communities of color are robbed of the right to grieve their own dead in more public ways, the critique highlights the politics of mourning in contemporary queer life.

As long as queer communities continue to base queer grievability on the logics of normative familial kinships, idealized professional success, and whiteness, true queer coalition will remain beyond our grasp. As critics and citizens, we must reconceptualize our normative investments in hegemonic grief and grievable bodies. If white queer grief continues to operate insularly, a true coalitional politics of queer survival will fail us.



In hindsight, it makes sense that not only was I, a cisgender white queer man, affectively moved by Alcorn's suicide, but that I even heard of it in the first place. I remember being moved to tears when I read Alcorn's suicide note for the first time. Our lives were similar in many respects. The product of white suburbia, shunned by parents, school officials, and isolated in the rural Midwest, the teenage years of Alcorn were hauntingly familiar to me. When Andrew Gelwicks noted that "Leelah has become synonymous with the devastating loneliness a trans teen can endure,"<sup>75</sup> my initial instinct was to believe him. As my critical sensibilities grew throughout my years in graduate school, I realized I needed to question such essentialist claims and instead place Alcorn's death amid the backdrop of violence committed against transgender and queer women of color. Not only was the framing as Alcorn as representative of all transgender youth problematic but so too is the underlying ethic undergirding the politic of public emotionality within the queer imaginary.

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### **Chapter 3. The Suicide of Aaron Hernandez: Carceral Queer of Color Masculinity and Sexuality**

By the time former New England Patriots linebacker Aaron Hernandez hanged himself in his cell at the Souza-Baranowski State Penitentiary on April 19, 2017, he had spent nearly three years in solitary confinement. Before his incarceration for the 2013 murder of Odin Lloyd, Hernandez led a storied life. A golden boy of local sport, Hernandez was in many ways the epitome of raw talent, brute strength, and idealized masculinity.<sup>1</sup> As the years progressed, the illustrious rise and fall of Hernandez was, for several years, a source of fascination for national news media: spanning from his high school and college career to his eventual key role in the Patriots' 2011 AFC Championship season. Less than a year after his 2012 \$40 million contract extension with the Patriots, Hernandez was arrested and eventually charged with Lloyd's murder. Years later, Hernandez re-entered public consciousness when, at the cusp of his suicide, rumors began whispering about the man's alleged secret sexuality. The suicide of Hernandez is best understood as a conjuncture nestled in the convergence of the mass incarceration of people of color, the racist logics of compulsory heterosexuality, and the unique sexual subjectivity of a life presumably on the down-low.

Two days after Hernandez's suicide, Martin Gould reported that the man penned three letters upon his death: the first for his fiancée Shayanna Jenkins; the second for his four-year-old daughter, and the last letter, around which, most of the public speculation circulated, was for his "gay prison lover."<sup>2</sup> From the moment rumors of Hernandez's sexuality became national news, fellow inmate Kyle Kennedy became a central figure in the aftermath of Hernandez's suicide. Almost immediately, national and international news media appropriated the story of his suicide and various publics worked in vain to reckon the man's sordid life of crime with his "troubled" sexuality. Public discourse in Hernandez's cultural wake narrativized Hernandez in three



contradictory ways: that of an overly sexualized queer jailbird whose lifetime prison sentence was nothing more than a homosexual's paradise; that of victim whose incarceration and lonely death by suicide marshalled widespread sympathy; and finally as one bound within the political matrices of the closet. The primary modality through which the suicide of Aaron Hernandez was made legible in the public sphere was through the enactment of public deliberation regarding his sexuality. Moreover, the suicide of Aaron Hernandez created the conditions of possibilities for myriad publics to map the many contexts in which his suicide and life as a queered man of color occurred. Even as Hernandez's life and suicide elicited queer sympathy in some contexts, his death by suicide also demonstrated the vexed terrain of intersectional masculinity. I argue that the rhetorics producing Hernandez's post-mortem queer subjectivity were marked by competing logics of perverse homophobia and queer sympathy. My argument is not simply that hegemonic ideology frames the ways in which we make sense of the deceased but rather that perverse homophobia and radical queer sympathy are mutually formative in making meaning in queer suicide's cultural wake. The convergence of disparate responses to queer death and sexuality build upon one another effectively compounding the multiple meanings of Hernandez's queer suicide.

Although Hernandez's suicide and cultural wake lie at the intersection of queer of color sexuality, sport masculinities, and public memory, no scholarly attention to the troubled man's life and death currently exists. Even despite Diana Moskovitz's claim that Hernandez, in death, "became a vehicle for whatever headlines and narratives seem most compelling, or convenient, at that moment,"<sup>3</sup> there remains no detailed analysis of discourses surrounding the complexities of his troubled life and death. The primary aim of this chapter is to build upon the vocabularies of masculinity studies and queer of color sexualities to make sense of the queering of gone

historical figures. While there is no manifest proof of Hernandez engaging in queer sexual acts, a disidentificatory<sup>4</sup> ethos allows the critic to recognize how in its fullest context spectacular and quotidian performances may “beget queer effects all the same.”<sup>5</sup> So acts that may not be intended as political or queer may still, when analyzed in historical context, be read as subversive in hindsight. Charles Morris suggests that whether or not a historical figure identified as queer, the collective memory surrounding the individual may be. Morris continues and claims that queering one’s public memory, “affords opportunities for queer worldmaking through disruptive undoings of historically leveraged ‘truths’ and normativities, challenges to institutional and individual violence, and enticing invitations to rhetorical reconstructions.”<sup>6</sup> While I am not interested in historical moves that corroborate allegations that Hernandez was in fact gay or bisexual, I am interested in what the posthumous queering of Hernandez does rhetorically for the queer national imaginary.

Towards these ends, this chapter proceeds in the following parts. First, because I argue the sensationalization of Hernandez’s suicide and sexuality were inextricably bound within the ways in which publics read the man biographically as a Latino, professional football player with strong ties to gang activity, I contextualize the convergence of sport and violent masculinities within contemporary American culture pertinent to the man Aaron Hernandez. Next, in my analysis I examine the discourses in Hernandez’s wake around three distinct relationalities: Hernandez as a sexual being; Hernandez as a sympathetic being; and finally as one who was bound within the conflicting politics of the closet. I conclude by offering theoretical ruminations of the man’s cultural wake at the nexus of conflicting masculinities, the erotics of racism within the white imaginary, and public memory.

## **At a Convergence of Masculinities**

Because I suggest the biography and multiple identities of Hernandez functioned rhetorically as they addressed various publics, I find it necessary to historicize the vexed operatives of masculinities in which Hernandez lived and died. The anxieties surrounding the crises of Hernandez's masculinity are situated within a long normative investment in hegemonic American masculinity performatives. Understanding the intersection of Hernandez's street Latino ethos, status as a professional NFL player, his gang affiliations, and alleged "secret sexuality" helps to radically contextualize the deeply felt and very personal suicide of Hernandez in addition to the public responses thereof.

Born and raised in Bristol, Connecticut to a Borinquen father and an Italian mother, Aaron, since a child, revered his paternal Puerto Rican heritage. His *latinidad*<sup>7</sup> was evident in his constitution of self and, since an early age, he was racialized as a non-Black person of color. For example, his former college teammate explained, "We call him Chico. He's the only Puerto Rican on the team. When you call him Aaron, he doesn't really respond."<sup>8</sup> A diminutive and affectionate term for "boy" in Spanish, Chico, as Hernandez's nickname, gestures toward his deeply held affective investments in a Latino identity. Latino masculinity is largely undergirded by an ethos of machismo. Machismo refers to a broad swath of various enactments of masculinity that are both contradictory and embodied. José Torres explains that while machismo is often caricatured in the White imaginary through signifiers of physical aggression, sexual promiscuity, insecurity, substance abuse, spousal violence, and sexism<sup>9</sup>, machismo also encompasses several other less profiled qualities such as strength of will, daring, self-assertiveness, and self-confidence, in conjunction with softer and more emotional aspects such as affection, caring, tenderness, love, respect for self and others, and protectiveness toward women,

children, and less fortunate members of society provision for and protection of the family, strength in adverse situations, uncompromising positions on matters of great personal importance, pride, respect, dignity, and honor.<sup>10</sup> Understanding the rhetorics and embodied performances of machismo is important considering that the concept was fundamental to the way in which publics made sense of Hernandez's masculinity and sexuality posthumously.

Hernandez's masculine iterations of latinidad were compounded through his affiliation with gangs in both Connecticut and Florida. Flores and Hondagneu-Sotelo write that Hispanic/Chicano gang affiliation is inextricably rooted within institutional racism, poverty, and urban marginality.<sup>11</sup> While frequently the source of self-destructive behavior and overt violence, Latino gang affiliation undoubtedly provides degrees of social protection, a sense of familial belonging and a structured brotherly *communitas*.<sup>12</sup> Yet, the demands of street authenticity suggests Flores and Hondagneu-Sotelo, necessitates a violence, undergirded by violent machismo, propelling these men into "aggressive, hyper-masculine stances and, in turn, interpersonal violence [which] provokes police harassment and funnels these men into the criminal justice pipeline."<sup>13</sup> Hernandez's gang affiliations have long been a source of speculation in the public archive. For example, Ron Borges, with *The Rolling Stone*, writes, "Instead of teammates, Hernandez built a cohort of thugs, bringing stone-cold gangsters over to the house to play pool, smoke chronic and carouse."<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the prosecution in the murder case of Daniel Jorge Correia de Abreu and Safiro Teixeira Furtada argued evidence of Hernandez's gang affiliation lied in Hernandez's very flesh. Prosecutors subpoenaed Hernandez's tattoo artists who, eight months after the shooting, gave the man a tattoo of "a semi-automatic handgun, one spent shell casing, and a cylinder from a revolver with five out of the six bullets remaining along with the words 'God forgives'"<sup>15</sup> Prosecutors argued that Hernandez's tattoos functioned as a

Hernandez confession. The prosecution's fascination with Hernandez's skin and tattoos is representative of a broader practice of "marking criminality"<sup>16</sup> and gang affiliation. Tattoos, long a mainstay in street performances of Latino authenticity, effectively proved, for the prosecution, Hernandez's involvement in both street crimes and the 2012 murder of Abreu and Furtada. The discourses and logics associating Latino men tattooing their body with inherently violent and dangerous gang members validates Trump's assertion that Latino men (presumably those of Mexican descent) are "drug dealers, criminals, rapists,"<sup>17</sup> and "animals."<sup>18</sup> The marking of Latino men as inherently violent, viscous, and inhumane, is a cornerstone of American white supremacy in the US South and Southwest.

The enactment of and anxieties surrounding Hernandez's Latino street ethos also played out upon the literal and symbolic field of contemporary American sport. Michael Butterworth explains that "sport is not a distraction from socio-political issues; rather, it is a constitutive site in which these issues are communicated."<sup>19</sup> In the context of the American sport milieu, Intercollegiate and professional football in the United States has, since the mid-twentieth century, been the "standard bearer of masculinity in sport"<sup>20</sup> while naturalizing and reinforcing a hegemonic masculinity predicated on a physical dominance over other men and women.<sup>21</sup> It is for these reasons that American football is "one of the most appropriate sports in which to find reproductions of hegemonic masculinity."<sup>22</sup> Hegemonic masculinity, while often appealed to through modalities of violence "embodies the most honored way of being a man" while "requiring all other men to position themselves in relation to it."<sup>23</sup> Rooted in Calvinism, a hegemonic, muscular masculinity in the United States vis-à-vis football has provided a cultural celebration of the traditionally White male body while "developing ethical character and conduct" for young boys and men beginning in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>24</sup>

To be sure, performances of masculinity as they play out on and off the professional football field is a deeply ambivalent conjuncture. In recent years, publics regularly organize against players of color who are embattled within domestic abuse and illegal drug allegations. While the genre of hegemonic football masculinity is undoubtedly misogynistic, homophobic, and sensationalistic it does afford the possibility for its players, who overwhelmingly are Black and Latino, to enact a form of racialized performance of agency while gaining capital otherwise nearly impossible for Black and Latino men. Moreover, Ben Carrington argues that the participation in sport of men of color offers a modality of cultural resistance to White supremacy and racism.<sup>25</sup> For Black men and non-Black men of color like Hernandez, participation in sport has the potential to be both “a form of resistance to White racism and as a symbolic marker<sup>26</sup> of community.

The exigence of Hernandez’s suicide accrued meaning within the public sphere against a backdrop of conflicting masculinities. Hernandez as a Borinquen and as a professional NFL player who has a documented history of gang related activities, was made legible through the sexualization of the recently deceased. Through appealing to these matrices, Hernandez’s suicide, amended by his sexuality entered public consciousness.

### **The Sexualization of Aaron Hernandez**

The overt sexualization of Hernandez was a primary way through which publics acquiesced the incarceration and suicide of Aaron Hernandez. Stories of Hernandez’s sexuality were myriad and conflated the distinction between gay and bisexual identities, mobilized traditional homophobia humor predicated on the perversion of anal sex, and obfuscated the specific conditions of same-sex acts while incarcerated. Taken together, the sexualization of

Hernandez highlights how queer post-mortem subjectivity is bound within the vices of anti-queer ideologies.

### **Conflating Gay and Bisexual**

A striking component of the discourse surrounding Hernandez included the conflicting ways in which rhetors toggled between the identity-based markers of gay and bisexual. Several rhetors, including journalists and Hernandez's own attorney, referred to the man as "gay" or struggling with a "gay secret"<sup>27</sup> while several others referred to the man as bisexual.<sup>28</sup> While the only man who truly knew of his sexual preferences is not available to corroborate any claims of his sexuality, the public was left to speculate how and to what extent Hernandez engaged in queer intimacies. The deliberation over whether Hernandez was gay or bisexual is representative of broader vexed relationalities with the term LGBT. In many cases, it is common for the term "gay" to represent myriad sexual and gendered subjectivities, particularly in this case leading to bisexual erasure and the collapsing of sexual nuances.<sup>29</sup> It is as if having even the slightest attraction or homosocial relation would qualify one as gay. This logic brings to mind the fear of being labeled gay thus necessitating the now blasé and tired "no homo" clarification straight men feel compelled to exclaim. Yet, there was a voice of dissent and caution on the troublesome collapsing of sexual identification in Hernandez's wake. For example, Cyd Zeigler and Jim Buzinski with *OutSports* write, "Just because a man has had sex with other men does not make him gay or bisexual. We know that is hard to understand for some, but many men "experiment" briefly with other men. Some men find circumstances drive them to sex with men. Prison is a particularly fascinating place, where otherwise completely straight men engage in sex, or even relationships, with other men."<sup>30</sup> Zeigler and Buzinski challenge the labeling of gay and bisexual

identities and further interrogate the pull and demands of situational exigence, in this case, prison, on human sexuality.

Thus, the suicide of Hernandez occurred in a context of what legal scholar Kenji Yoshino termed the epistemic erasure of bisexuality. Yoshino notes how both heterosexuals and homosexuals maintain vested interests in the erasure of bisexual individuals as both seek to recuperate any one individual for political gains.<sup>31</sup> While gay individuals seek to “claim” Hernandez as one of their own, particularly as they agitate for “gay rights” while incarcerated, other activists may suggest bisexuality is more appropriate, if the allegations are true, Hernandez pursued sexual relations with both men and women. That is to say, the labeling of Hernandez as any one given sexuality is inextricably tethered the politics of contemporary queer activism.

The deliberation over Hernandez as either gay or bisexual became the first step in the rhetorical figuration of Hernandez as a overtly sexualized item within the public imaginary. In naming Hernandez as a specific type of sexual being, the public could determine the extent to the homophobic rhetorics that would eventually frame the way his suicide entered into public consciousness.

### **The Butt of Aaron Hernandez as the Butt of the Joke**

A primary way through which publics acquiesced the suicide of Hernandez took the form of perverse homophobic humor. At the cusp of Aaron Hernandez’s suicide, rumors began swirling within the public archive of the incarcerated man’s “secret sexuality.”<sup>32</sup> A key component this discourse took the form of overtly sexualizing the man, effectively reducing him to his anus. Homophobic humor, rooted in misogyny and sexism, is largely predicated on the hilarity and perversion of the penetration of the gay man’s anus. Through the deployment of



what I am calling anal discourses, proponents of Hernandez's incarceration rationalized the abuse and dehumanization of Hernandez through the reduction of Hernandez to his anus and its presumed penetration. Anal discourses reinforce sexist logics which purport that for a man to be anally penetrated by another man signifies a total stripping of one's "manhood" through anal emasculation. Such a logic frames masculinity as possible only through the penetration and sexual domination of and over his (presumed female) partner while also presuming that normative masculinity itself is a desirable subject position. Despite the vast complexities surrounding Hernandez's sexuality and masculinity, a key component in the public archive regarding Hernandez's incarceration and suicide constructed a narrative fascinated with Hernandez's back side.

A common narrative circulating around Aaron Hernandez was a highly sexist misogynistic, and homophobic belief that Hernandez was a highly eroticized promiscuous homosexual bottom. The articulation and fasciation of Hernandez as bottom is representative of broader cultural logics wherein one's receptive ass serves as synecdoche for the whole of a gay/bisexual/queer men.<sup>33</sup> The narrativization of Hernandez's penetration is one that worked to dehumanize the man while also in a perverse way justified his life sentence assuming that he would have wanted to stay incarcerated so he could have unfettered access to the slew of sexually starved men. The reductive logic wherein queer(ed) men are reduced to their anus validates many legal arguments surrounding the punishments queer men receive. For example, a gay man in South Dakota was recently sentenced to death rather than receive a life sentence on the presumption, that he, as a gay man who slept with other men, would "enjoy" prison too much. "If he's gay," noted one jury, "we'd be sending him where he wants to go."<sup>34</sup>

Initially, Hernandez's ass was queered through a metaphorization of sports vernacular. For example, when Michelle McPhee was invited onto WEEI's "The Kirk & Callahan Show" to promote her recent book on the Boston Marathon bombing, McPhee, Kirk Minihane, and Gerry Callahan worked to pejoratively queer Hernandez by speculating that the man was a bottom. To the laughter of McPhee, Minihane and Callahan called Hernandez a "tight end on and off the field." The joke, predicated on the hilarity of queer male sex, is also based upon sexist and misogynistic myths of genital, primarily vaginal, looseness and tightness; that virginal women have "tight" vaginas while the loss of that virginity permanently loosens it. Moreover, the metaphor takes on additional significance given the context of American football. The tight end, as an offensive position, is a hybrid position capable of both serving an offensive line and wide receiver. The hybrid-ness of the actual sport position parallels the presumed bisexual-ness of Hernandez inferred by the sportscasters especially when they claim that once incarcerated the man "became a wide receiver." The vexed and problematic nature of these homophobic jokes is compounded given that the context is an episode that is supposed to be about the trauma of the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing.

I read the fascination of Hernandez's queered anus as part of a larger conjuncture which posits Hernandez and his ass as a source of cultural anxieties surrounding hegemonic iterations of masculinity and homosexuality. The reduction of Hernandez to his alleged homosexual preferences, and ass, was also a source of hilarity to many anonymous online users across various media. The humor suggests that Hernandez would have enjoyed being incarcerated for life for the sole purpose that he could have more sex with men. For example, user spookym writes, "If he was gay, why would he kill himself in prison? He would have hung around (bad choice of words) to enjoy the 'benefits.'"<sup>35</sup> The structure of spookym's joke is predicated on an

unspoken justification for the incarceration of queer men: that to lock them up for life is to do them a favor in giving them more sexual possibilities than they could ever be afforded while free. Homophobic humor such as this collapses consensual same-sex acts with coercive prison rape while also reducing queer life to sexual acts. The benefits of prison sex, it follows, is always something of which queer men should be grateful. Elsewhere, Twitter user NFL\_meme tweeted “Aaron Hernandez's stats so far this AFC Championship game: 0 receptions, 0 yards, 3 drops of the soap.”<sup>36</sup> This particular tweet, dated three years before Hernandez’s suicide, foregrounds how homophobic humor predicated upon the hilarity of anal sex permeates public discourses about incarceration and how sporting masculinities. Dropping the soap humor refers to a cultural fear of exposing and making vulnerable one’s self to penetration by the ever present homosexual predator in prison scenarios. For the author of this meme, the only thing professional success Hernandez has achieved is the ability to be anally penetrated by fellow inmates. This joke, undergirded by sexist and patriarchal logics that idolizes phallic masculinity and vilifies anal receptivity assumes that for Hernandez to be anally penetrated “signals the ultimate act of emasculation.”<sup>37</sup>

Drop the soap humor was also a common in the anal discourse surrounding Hernandez. As a cautionary tale, the phrase implies that while naked in a community shower if one drops his soap, he will be forced to bend over (assuming his receptive sexual position) to expose his anus to forcible penetration by a fellow inmate. For example, a .gif posted onto Daily Snark by Randy Oliver superimposed Hernandez’s head onto the body of character Kenny Davis from the 1998 movie *Half Baked*. In the scene, Davis, surrounded by several naked men in a prison shower, uses his soap on a rope as a microphone to sing Eric Carmen’s *All by Myself*. Just as he botches the high note, a squelching sound (reminiscent of sexual penetration) interjects and we see the

soap drop, land, and bounce dramatically as it hits the ground. Six prisoners turn their heads, waiting to see what transpires. Davis/Hernandez bends over to pick up the soap and Nasty Nate, who spends the whole movie aggressively pursuing Davis, walks into the frame approaching Davis/Hernandez from behind while the Main Title from *Jaws* plays. In this scenario, Nasty Nate, a large in stature, muscular Black man is the sexual predator ready to penetrate exposed and unsuspecting Davis/Hernandez. The emasculating penetration of Davis/Hernandez is framed through a separate cultural logic that purports Black men as sexually predatory in nature. Patricia Hill Collins argues that the overt sexualization of Black men is but a modality of the justification of mass incarceration of Black and brown bodies. Moreover, Collins argues that cultural depictions of Black bodies and Black penises work to advance a myth of “Black men’s insatiable sexual appetite for White women,”<sup>38</sup> or in this case, feminized White men (as in the case of Hernandez’s alleged prison lover, Kyle Kennedy). The violence surrounding the anus in prison contexts is presented as common and expected in the daily life of Hernandez.

The arrest, incarceration, solitary confinement, and eventual suicide of Aaron Hernandez provided an occasion for discourse to circulate homophobic humor in the man’s wake. Taken together, making Hernandez’s butt the butt of the joke offers insight into contemporary anxieties surrounding sexuality, queerness, and its relationship with prevailing iterations of masculinity in prison contexts. There are several rhetorical consequences to the anal discourse humor surrounding Hernandez. The public’s fascination with Hernandez’s anus serve to not only reduce Hernandez to anus but also relied on racist assumptions of Black sexual aggressors. When read in its fullest context, such discourse framed the way in which publics made sense of Hernandez’s time in prison and the way in which he died behind bars.

### **Masc-for-Masc[ing Carceral Intimacy]**

By the time Hernandez committed suicide, he had spent nearly three years in solitary confinement, spending approximately 23 hours a day alone in his cell. In the wake of his suicide, another dominant public narrative eroticized and romanticized Hernandez's attempts for carceral companionship after his third suicide note was believed to be addressed to his "gay prison lover." The sexualization and eroticization of Hernandez's carceral companionship worked to queer the deceased in ways that failed to account for homosocial and homosexual encounters between men who do not identify as gay, bisexual, or queer but nonetheless engage in sexual activity. I turn now to the archive of Hernandez's carceral queer intimacies, composed of the spotlighting of fellow inmate Kyle Kennedy as well Hernandez's handwritten letters asking for a cellmate, and the litany of his presumably sex-based infractions.

From the moment rumors of Hernandez's sexuality became national news, fellow inmate Kyle Kennedy became a central figure in the aftermath of Hernandez's suicide. For example, two days after Hernandez was discovered hanged in his cell, Martin Gould, with the *Daily Mail*, reported Hernandez had penned a suicide note for his "gay prison lover" only citing a "source close to the investigation" with Kennedy being named in the following days.<sup>39</sup> In the weeks that followed, Hernandez's and Kennedy's relationship was rhetorically framed in ways that eroticized hyper-masculine same-sex desire. For example, Li with the *New York Post* wrote that "Hernandez's prison lover was another tough guy — a 22-year-old who raced motocross, built cycles and was convicted of knife-point robbery."<sup>40</sup> Li's characterization of Kennedy as a "tough guy" who races motorcycles, constructs his own bikes, and who has enough gumption to rob with only a knife is representative of broader same-sex discourses that prizes a performative ethos of hyper-masculinity.

Visuality functioned heavily in the erotic ethos surrounding the two men's relationship while incarcerated. The repeated displaying of Kennedy's bare, tattooed body supported the sexualization of the Kennedy and, by extension, Hernandez. Often juxtaposed alongside photos of Hernandez, Kennedy was introduced to the world in a state of semi undress. Kennedy, in the photo most widely circulated, is shirtless displaying his many tattoos across his arms, torso, chest, and neck. His boxers sit low and his pants sit even lower. One's eye follows the sharpness of his "sex lines" or the v-line created where the lower abdominals and obliques meet which draws attention to his pelvis. He stands contrapposto, his weight shifted giving him an air of masculine swagger. His left hand holds a half-smoked cigarette while his right displays a hand sign across his chest. With his head cocked back, lips slightly parted, Kennedy exudes sex and street authenticity. The implication was that Kennedy, known in prison as "Pure" and already the cat's meow, was the perfect and unquestionable fit for Hernandez.

In addition to the visual arguments evident, journalists circulated narratives that heavily sexualized Hernandez's relationship with Kennedy. After his suicide, a hand-written note to the Souza-Baranowski administration surfaced wherein Hernandez asked to be moved to another area of the prison which he said was "where I belong."<sup>41</sup> In the same letter Hernandez had pleaded with the administration, "So, please make this happen. I even prefer to move in with [name redacted] (but later confirmed to be Kyle Kennedy); me and him are very close and have been since the streets and that's FACT, not bullshit. He's my heart and like a real brother to me that's why I want and am requesting to go upstairs and live with him."<sup>42</sup> Danika Fears with the *New York Post* framed Hernandez's request to share a cell with Kennedy as "shack[ing] up with his alleged jailhouse lover."<sup>43</sup> Shacking up, a colloquial term, refers primarily to unmarried couple who lives together often while having sex. Hernandez's primary motive for a cellmate, in

this case, was to acquire access to sex and the ability to maintain his “jail house lover.” For Fears, the fact that Hernandez had been solitarily confined since his incarceration did not matter, rather Hernandez and Kennedy were sexual beings only seeking the ability to engage in sexual relations, thus reducing same-sex intimacy to sex. Other journalists aggressively documented Hernandez’s many sex-based infractions. For example, Perez writing for *USA Today Sports* described that in October 2016 Hernandez “was found to have locked himself in the cell with another inmate, something not permitted under prison guidelines because it “disrupts the normal operation of the facility.”<sup>44</sup> The presumption here is that Hernandez, a deviant and sexual being was before and during his incarceration a man up to no good.

The queering of Hernandez’s violent past, incarceration, and relationship with Kennedy fits into a long investment and fetishization of butch hegemonic masculinity. I suggest that the intended audience of the queering of Hernandez was primarily white gay men. While not explicitly associated with any particular class or racial affiliation, the eroticization of butch, masc, or violent men is one commonly attributed to that of White gay men. For example, Nguyen Tan Hoang suggests that the erotic transgressiveness of butch and working-class sexual sensibilities is one based upon “military paraphernalia, skin head haircuts, tattoos, and muscular physiques designed to suggest a life of manual labor.”<sup>45</sup> Thus, the claiming of Hernandez as a closeted queer man gave the White gay imaginary a sexual martyr around which they could enact pornographic sensibilities.

By referring to Kennedy as a “gay prison lover” and someone with whom Hernandez could “shack up,” the public discourse worked to fuel a long-standing eroticization of prison sex made evident in the plethora of the subgenre on hosting sites of pornographic content. The prison scenario has in recent decades been the place in which same-sex hyper-masculine desires play

out in highly racialized contexts. John Mercer suggests eroticization of same-sex activity within the prison scenario flourishes because:

Prisons are all male, self-contained environments where the social conventions of the outside world (i.e., the heterosexual world) do not apply and where hierarchical power relations can be played out. Prisons afford opportunities for characters identified as heterosexual to channel sexual energies through homosexuality, and the power dynamics implicit in prisons enable the S&M discourse to be articulated. In gay pornography, the prison becomes a fetishized space of danger, sexual tension and desire.<sup>46</sup>

Moreover, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, women-in-prison movies flourished wherein women enacted both heteronormative and queer sensibilities. In both cases, public fantasies are fundamentally pornographic and homoerotic in nature within public imaginations.

Whether intentional or not, the public discourse made sense of Hernandez's desire for same-sex intimacy through pornographic tropes of normative masculinities predicated on hegemonic performances of closet masculinity. Taken together, Kennedy's "tough guy demeanor," Hernandez calling him his heart, and the framing of their homosocial bond as "shacking up," the public narrative worked to, in a perverse way, co-opt the man in ways that embraced a limited view of the complexities of male sexuality. This narrative, among other things, addressed white publics in ways that allowed them to acquiesce the fact that Hernandez endured prolonged solitary confinement and was resigned to spend the rest of his life behind bars. Through foregrounding normative homophobic narratives of same-sex activity behind bars, publics could turn a blind eye to the violence of the carceral state and the structural violence Hernandez endured before and during his incarceration.

Other activists used the incarceration of Hernandez and the allegations surrounding his sexuality as a way to advocate for prison reform and inmate sexual health. For example, a Facebook page "Gay Men for Aaron Hernandez" accrued over 200 followers and was a location



for its followers to source content on finding and writing letters to LGBTQ-identified prisoners, news updates from Hernandez's trial, and for sympathetic artists to share digital artwork featuring Hernandez: the most striking of which includes a shirtless Hernandez with a glittering gold unicorn placed on his right shoulder with two garish cartoon vector rainbows superimposed over his shoulder and exposed torso. The online forum allowed its anonymous administrators to engage in deliberative discourse, specifically regarding the presumed sexual health of Hernandez. For example, a post on May 16, 2016 called for a mandate on free condoms within all US prisons. "Free condoms for inmates should be policy in all prisons," began the post, "It will stop inmates like Aaron from getting AIDS and infecting others while practicing a gay lifestyle. It will help Aaron stay healthy and live a long life."<sup>47</sup> The post is accompanied by image of an inmate in a orange jumpsuit with his hands cuffed behind his back holding an orange condom over his bottom only inches from his anus. The circular condom, a bull's eye and cross hair of sorts, offers conflicting reads. On one hand, it furthers the fetishization of Hernandez specifically, and queer prisoners generally, by assuming that the prison setting is a gay bottom's paradise. Taking the argument to its final conclusion, with the addition of free condoms, one should be able to "practice a gay lifestyle" healthily and without abandon free from the fear of STIs. But most fundamentally, these arguments, albeit to more progressive ends, are nonetheless posthumously figuring Hernandez as queer and doing so in the service of political projects. While on the other hand, the argument also advocates for gay and bisexual men in prison who are at an increased risk for HIV infection.

### **Counciling Sympathy Through Suicide**

Another primary element of discourse in Aaron Hernandez's wake involved various publics appropriating his death in ways that councilled sympathy for a man found guilty of

murder. Yet, through situating Hernandez amid a broader tapestry of domestic and sexual abuse and violent masculinity, the narrativization of Hernandez rehumanized the man who died alone in his cell. Through implicating toxic masculinity and the demands of a violent street ethos, the narrative worked to rehumanize the deceased by lessening his culpability and making complicit broader ideologies of violent, hegemonic masculinities. Beginning with his 2013 arrest and continuing well after his 2017 suicide, the various traumas Hernandez experienced throughout his life were different sources of inquiry for journalists and activists. Though the historicization of Hernandez's life of trauma occurred non-linearly over the years, I map them here chronologically so as to glean together the archive of hypersexualization queer activists worked to build in Hernandez's wake.

### **A Child Abused**

One element of discourse that worked to marshal sympathy for Hernandez took expression in child abuse discourse. Alyssa Anderson, the college girlfriend of Hernandez, claimed that while incarcerated, the two exchanged several letters which over time became more intense. Anderson, in a dramatized docu-series titled *Aaron Hernandez Uncovered*, alleged that Hernandez “open[ed] up about some of the struggles he had gone through as a kid. He admitted to being molested as a kid, but never dealt with it. And it led to issues with his sexuality.”<sup>48</sup> This claim, largely unsubstantiated in the documentary, failed to break into the national news cycle but was picked up and reported by *Oxygen*, *Outsports*, and several local *Fox* affiliates. The unsubstantiated claim that Hernandez was molested as a youth and it was this trauma that caused “issues” with his hetero/homosexuality is based in a troubling and worrisome investment in both the pathologization of homosexuality associating it with perversion and pedophilia. In claiming that Hernandez was molested as a child and that experience “led to issues” with his sexuality

yokes together pedophiles and sexual predators with queerness in ways that pathologize and rationalize the criminalization and incarceration of queerness.

Foregrounding the molestation of Hernandez as an innocent youth is suggestive of a highly normative child saving politics that has long undergirded whose lives ought to be protected. Erica Meiners places in situ child-saving discourses within broader regimes of racist, political, and economic struggles, which coalesce around increased police surveillance, mass incarceration, the restricting of First Amendment rights, transphobia, and same-sex marriage discrimination.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, James Kincaid suggests that child saving discourses are not value-neutral but are often “weaponized to assault adulthood, sophistication, rational moderation, and judicious adjustment to the ways of the world.”<sup>50</sup> Thus, Anderson attempted to make sense of Hernandez’s non-normative sexuality in ways pathologized queer sexualities by rhetorically associating it with perversion and pedophilic sensibilities. Through situating Hernandez as victim to this external trauma this narrative worked to, in a small way, absolve the man from his homosexuality and life of crime. In this way, the public could mourn the child Hernandez while vilifying the assumed homosexual male pedophile.

### **Figuring Paternal and Maternal Roles in Hernandez’s Adolescence**

A key theme in the narrativization of Hernandez’s life of trauma came through emphasizing the dead’s deeply felt, albeit tumultuous, familial bonds. From the moment Hernandez’s arrest became national news, the role of Hernandez’s mother, late father, and step-father in his teenage years, all became central in making sense of Hernandez’s life of trouble. The narrativization of Hernandez’s parents fell along gendered and sexual axes which called into question Hernandez’s mother, Terri, while commending his father, David. The gendered

discourse of Hernandez's parents is consequential in that it represents a broader logic that rends woman as complicit in childrearing, especially as responsible in the raising of "bad" children.

David, described as a "larger-than-life charmer with a maître d's flair and a habit for hugging everyone he met" was remembered in every sense as the cat's meow. Ron Burges with *The Rolling Stone* chronicled David's early years as sprinkled with alcohol, drugs, lousy friends, assault, and petty larceny.<sup>51</sup> Yet, David, and his twin brother Dennis, the story goes, would eventually give up their lives of crime. David married Terri, bought a small cottage, and had two widely gifted sons. The narration of David as a once troubled young man but devoted and doting father worked to maintain normative cultural investments in the mythic father, who despite adversity, provides for his children to uproot the family out of poverty and obscurity. Burges writes, "Dennis took elaborate pains to keep them on the straight and narrow. [He] built a gym in the family basement, paved a half-court in the backyard, and peppered the boys with can-do slogans, burning them in through repetition."<sup>52</sup> This narrative portrayed David as a guiding source of guidance and inspiration for Aaron and his brother. In other words, the successes of the young men were due, in large part, to the heroic and admirable dedication of David, the patriarch of the Hernandez household.

Many journalistic retellings of Hernandez's teenage years detail the troubles he had with dealing with his "ex-thug" of a father's death.<sup>53</sup> The telling of Hernandez's early adolescent years was one deprived of a steady father figure. For example, Ron Burges with *The Rolling Stone* writes that, "There was such hunger in that kid for a father's hand, and such greatness itching to get out, that coach after coach had covered for him whenever the bad Aaron showed – the violent, furious kid who was dangerous to all, most particularly, it seems, to his friends."<sup>54</sup> In this, Hernandez, robbed of his literal father early on, sought solace through paternal guidance in

his many coaches. The remark maintains a highly normative investment in patriarchal gendered relations as it intersects with child rearing. This logic purports that young boys, denied of paternal figures, turn to lives of drugs, violence, and crimes.

While his father's role was the source of admiration and praise, Hernandez's mother, Terri was remembered in ways that rendered her a "bad" mother. By narrating Terri through her maternal crimes, the logic followed that it was Terri's failed motherhood that gave cause to Aaron's eventual life of crime. Burges writes that Terri was a "bottomless source of grief"<sup>55</sup> for the sons. Burges explains how Terri, when Aaron was only 12, was arrested for booking bets on sports, which "cast shame on the boys and dug a rift with Aaron that deepened" over subsequent years.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, it was alleged that Terri began cheating on Dennis with Jeffrey Cummings, a "physically abusive coke dealer" nicknamed Meathead.<sup>57</sup> At this point, the political implication in Burges narration becomes apparent, Terri, a deeply troubled woman failed substantially in her motherly duties by putting her gambling vices and seedy boyfriends before David and her two sons.

Hernandez's suicide created the conditions of possibility for discourse that made complicit various relationalities in Hernandez's life. Through implicating the evils of a pedophilic abuser and a mother who failed in her maternal duties, the narrativization of Hernandez's youth worked to in a way absolve the man of his sins, problematizing his culpability in the murder of Odin Lloyd. The narrativization of Hernandez in such a way attempted to humanize the recently deceased and placed the man's life in normative, albeit, sympathetic frames.

## **The Politics of the Closet**

The third and final discourse circulating in Hernandez cultural wake positioned the man within the confines of the closet. This occurred through two primary modalities: first, this narrative attributed the man's violence to the psychological distress of living a closeted life and; second, compelled his fiancée Shayanna Jenkins to recuperate his heterosexuality so as to re-establish her own normative heterosexuality.

### **A Violent, Closeted Life**

Much of the discourse in the immediate aftermath of Hernandez's death worked to make sense of Lloyd's death and used Hernandez's alleged sexuality as a possible motive in the killing. The narrative, for most, was inextricably bound within the context of a violent sport masculinity and the need to keep closeted anything other than one's heterosexuality. For example, Christopher Brennan and Larry McShane with the *New York Daily News* wrote, "Hernandez was locked up because of a murder that may have been motivated by a desire to keep his sexuality a secret. Hernandez's sexual ambiguity was known to his pal Odin Lloyd, who was dating the sister of the football star's fiancée...The 6-foot-1, 245-pound Hernandez may have murdered Lloyd to ensure that he wouldn't be outted to his bride-to-be."<sup>58</sup> Hernandez's physicality is situated within the physicality and idealization of the NFL. The juxtaposition of his sexuality and stature does work to enthymematically link hegemonic masculinity with the sport of football. In juxtaposing Hernandez's size with fear of his sexuality being "outted," the discourse works to offer, what Kenneth Burke calls, a perspective of incongruity. In most cases, one's height and weight is inconsequential in the context of an interpersonal feud. Yet, in this case, referring to "6-foot-1, 245 pound Hernandez" links his large stature with the corporeal dimensions of a celebrated violent masculinity in American football culture. While, Hernandez's

race often went undiscussed, visually his Latino identity was present which marked him as a brown, racialized minority. The combination of his race and large stature rhetorically marked the man as a threat, effectively at odds with hegemonic assumptions that associate queerness with passivity and physically non-threatening stature. Moreover, the allegation that he murdered out of fear of being outted, also taken up by the prosecution, positioned Hernandez as victim to both the closet and hegemonic masculinity. Being outted as queer, or even having rumors alleging as such is enough to lose professional endorsements, and be repeatedly traded up until one's contract is lost.<sup>59</sup>

While nearly four years passed from the murder of Lloyd to the suicide of Hernandez, a narrative of victimhood and self-defense arose in the immediate aftermath of Hernandez's suicide. Activists and journalists worked to narrativize a decade of trouble within the triangulated forces of compulsory, violent heterosexuality and sporting masculinities. It was in this context Monique Judge, a journalist for *The Root*, claimed:

If Hernandez carried on this thug image in order to hide his sexuality, then this story is even more tragic than initially thought because it means that America, and all the toxic masculinity and male fragility that it perpetuates, is at least partially complicit in these crimes. We live in a society where men are not allowed to be viewed as less than manly for fear of being ostracized, or, worse yet, are persecuted for who they are and who they love. If Hernandez was indeed trapped in the closet, the ending of his story is even sadder than we imagined.<sup>60</sup>

Judge's defense of Hernandez asks her audience to embrace an understanding of violence as one begot by sport and street masculinities. Through contextualizing Hernandez's story through the lens of fear and compulsory masculinity, Judge highlights the mental and physical anguish in which Hernandez must have lived. The contextualization of crime and violence described by Judge is further elaborated by user PootMcFruitcakesJr who commented on her article, "The vast majority of people thin[k] sentences are too lenient when briefly described in the manner of a

newspaper article...but the vast majority of people think sentences are too harsh when they're presented with a case forensically laid out in the manner of a court case. People do all sorts of horrific things, but rarely without complex context. It's a lot easier to have stark black and white opinions if we pretend context doesn't exist."<sup>61</sup> Judge and PootMcFruitcakesJr both work to convince the reader how Hernandez, ensconced with the throes of violent masculinity, was and remains complicit within acts of queer violence.

The ending of the story, Hernandez alone in his cell with the floor slicked with shampoo and the cell door jammed with cardboard is tragic in its own right but accrues additional significance when placed in the context of what Judge calls a life of thug-ness. Judge understands Hernandez's affinity for crime, drugs, and life's excesses as a particular kind of disidentification, in the Muñozian sense. To be sure, adopting a street ethos is unequivocally a survival strategy that minority subjects engage in so as to negotiate what Munoz calls a "phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship."<sup>62</sup> Placing Hernandez's crimes amongst minoritarian survival strategies, Judge's argument works to describe how often crime is consummation of a life lived under white supremacy and compulsory heterosexuality.

Other supporters and proponents of Hernandez emphasized the quotidian stressors of being a queer person of color. For example, Dwayne Steward placed the life, crimes, and death of Aaron Hernandez at the feet of what he called "hyper-masculinity." Steward, on *The Other Side with Dwayne Steward*, argues that



Homophobia led to a lot of Aaron Hernandez's actions. He was Latino, a gang member, and a football player. Being openly gay in those three situations is rather dangerous. LGBTQ people of color in the United State have a higher rate of suicide. Of course being a gang member means hyper-masculinity is a huge deal and having any type of show that you may be homosexual or gay can definitely get you killed. And lastly he was football player: a nationally known and very well known and recognized and highly paid football player. And if we learned anything from Michael Sam...we know that he couldn't at all be gay in that situation... Our country's reverence of hyper-masculinity led to Aaron Hernandez's downfall.<sup>63</sup>

In this example, Steward uses the suicide of Hernandez, as a point of intervention regarding race, sexuality, and criminality. The narrativization of Hernandez as a man dictated by the cultural demands placed upon Latinx people, professional football players, and members of Latino gangs, constitutes Hernandez as a uniquely vexed and intersectional being inverts understandings of culpability. In claiming "our country's reverence of hyper-masculinity led to Aaron Hernandez's downfall," Steward effectively argues "our country" is more concerned with the ideologies of masculinity rather than those dictated by its vices. Steward, speaking in Hernandez's wake, makes complicit the demands of survival placed upon a racialized minority in the highly violent contexts of sport and street cultures.

### **Heterosexual Recuperation: "He Was Very Much a Man to Me"**

The final nodal point in the Hernandez's wake involves the recuperative work done by his fiancée Shayanna Jenkins. The post-mortem queering of Hernandez threw into question Jenkins's sexuality through the public speculation of her partner's sexuality. Jenkins was forced to renarrate Hernandez in ways that appealed to traditional normative masculinity heterosexuality, so as to defend her own identity as a straight woman. For example, on May 15, Jenkins-Hernandez, spoke on Dr. Phil McGraw's television show to, among other things, quell the rumors that Hernandez was either homosexual or bisexual. When asked by McGraw if Hernandez was "secretly gay" Jenkins responded:

The Aaron that I know, no. He had no indication or feeling that he was such. He was very much a man to me. I don't know where this came from. It's embarrassing in a sense. It's hurtful regardless if it's true or not. It's just not something that I saw. It's not something that I believe. And it's just not him.

Jenkins, in the queer wake of Hernandez, was charged with both defending the heterosexuality of Hernandez while confessing her own. She was making it clear that the man she loved and slept with was not queer. For if Hernandez was queer so too then was she for knowingly engaging with him sexually. John Sloop argues that confessing one's heterosexuality in the context of having one's partner publically queered works to concretize heterosexuality while preventing the "public blurring of sexuality and identity."<sup>64</sup> Moreover, Jenkin's articulation of Hernandez's sexuality affirms the homo/hetero binary effectively obfuscating the possibility of bisexual or other non-binary sexualities.

## **Conclusion**

Public discourse in the cultural wake of Hernandez's suicide narrativized the man in three contradictory ways: that of an overly sexualized queer jailbird whose lifetime prison sentence was nothing more than a homosexual's paradise; that of victim whose incarceration and lonely death by suicide counseled widespread sympathy; and finally as one bound within the political matrices of the closet, the primary modality through which the suicide of Aaron Hernandez was made legible in the public sphere was through his troubled sexuality. Given that conjunctures are "more than a mere context," Hernandez's suicide, is a social conjuncture insofar as it congealed within the public imaginary as "an articulation, accumulation, or condensation of contradictions."<sup>65</sup> The suicide of Hernandez, read in the fullest alongside his life, is constellated not only by violent homophobic logics reducing the man to his presumed sexual position but also by more normative logics which attempted to marshal sympathy for the man despite relying on

hegemonic codes of parental responsibility and culpability. Together, these disparate narratives “arrived at a balance or temporary settlement in the wake of Hernandez.

While the only man who truly knew the dimensions of his sexuality is no longer walking this earth, publics in recent years were left to reconcile the man’s sins with his sexuality by rendering him queer and appealing to various ideologies of a normative masculinity predicated on myriad dimensions of cultural sexualities. My reading of these narratives are predicated on an ethic of a queer collective memory. It goes without saying that many queers identified with the deceased because his life, in many ways, was to some degree queer. He was a product of a domestically violent household, used his talents to escape his past, and had an affinity for life’s excesses. While the queering of Hernandez hinges on what Morris calls a historical queer worldmaking project which “affords opportunities for disruptive undoings of historically leveraged ‘truths’ and normativities, challenges to institutional and individual violence, and enticing invitations to rhetorical reconstructions.”<sup>66</sup> Yet, on the other hand, the post-mortem queering of Hernandez is predicated upon long-standing perverse homophobia and investments in normative understandings of heteronormativity. In other words, the cultural wake of Hernandez suggests that queerness is bound by competing logics that may, in some instances, offer radical and emancipatory reads that render the man as sympathetic, while at other times, render the man subordinate to perverse homophobic heterosexuality. I have demonstrated in various ways that the rendering of Hernandez as queer challenged and supported various ideological and institutional assumptions of masculinity and queerness while, at times, appealing to and reinforcing those very same assumptions.

Moreover, I have argued that the sexualization of Hernandez obfuscates the material conditions in which incarcerated individuals, in this case Aaron Hernandez, find themselves. By

the time Aaron Hernandez killed himself, he had spent nearly three years in solitary confinement, spending at least 23 hours a day “alone in a cell built for two.”<sup>67</sup> Writing in 2013, Grossfeld with the *Boston Globe* chronicled Hernandez’s typical day while in isolation. “For 21 hours per day, Hernandez is locked in a 7-foot-by-10-foot single cell,” wrote Grossfeld with the *Boston Globe*. While in solitary confinement, those incarcerated are isolated from any and all human contact save for prison staff for up to 23 hours a day. Despite several lawsuits and evidence speaking to its psychological harm, solitary confinement remains an essential disciplinary component of the U.S. carceral system. Lisa Guenther explained that solitary confinement, “deprives prisoners of the bodily presence of others, forcing them to rely on the isolated resources of their own subjectivity, with the (perhaps surprising) effect of eroding or undermining that subjectivity.”<sup>68</sup> In the most material sense, solitary confinement is an effective modality of discipline and dehumanization in the carceral state. As the public narrative eroticized Hernandez’s and Kennedy’s alleged relationship it failed to account for the structural problems of the mass incarceration and isolation of people in the U.S. And the racial disparities of those placed in solitary confinement are stark. Even when men of color represent a minority of those incarcerated at a given facility they overwhelmingly represent a majority of those in isolation. For example, in California, Latino men represent only forty percent of the general prison population but represent eighty-six percent of those placed in solitary confinement.<sup>69</sup> Since the country’s founding the United States has not only incarcerated poor and oppressed people of color but also isolated them engaging in what Kerness and Bissonette Lewey call “no touch torture.” Whether it be an isolation unit, control unit, or solitary confinement the dehumanization of prisoners is material. It is often the case that those incarcerated and punitively isolated have their food, water, sleep, and human contact monitored, reduced, or stopped altogether.<sup>70</sup>

The suicide of Aaron Hernandez was a rhetorical exigence; one that brought together arguments surrounding mass incarceration, violence, machismo, and sports. The tragic life and suicide of Aaron Hernandez provides critical communication scholars an opportunity to situate discourses regarding his life, crimes, and suicide within the interlocking structures of inequality that so often affect black and brown queers within the contemporary United States. The rhetorics producing Hernandez's post-mortem queer subjectivity were marked by competing logics of both perverse homophobia and queer sympathy, thus offering insight into the nuanced meaning of post-mortem rhetorical queer subjectivity. While some emancipatory potential persists in post-mortem queering of a gone subject, the radical potential still retains several limits bound by persistent homophobia and the marking of queer of color masculinities as perverse. In situating Hernandez's queered life within systems of hegemonic masculinity, white supremacy, and patriarchal sexualities, his life and death by suicide accrues meaning only against these backdrops. Moreover, the queer wake of Hernandez also offers insight into queer suicide and queer rhetorical studies. The lesson here, I argue, is that to critically interrogate the queerness of pain and trauma, one must analyze how constitutive rhetorics queer both individuals and the social institutions in which they have lived and died. For example, appeals to Hernandez's queerness, if based on the overt sexualization of Black bodies, or the erasure of bisexuality cannot gesture toward a radical worldmaking queerness. If queerness is predicated upon violence, the materialization of a historical queer subject will ultimately resist the radical and emancipatory logics of queerness.

## Notes

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<sup>12</sup> Orozco Flores and Hondagneu-Sotelo, "Chicano Gang Members," 478.

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<sup>14</sup> Ron Borges and Paul Solotaroff, "Aaron Hernandez: Inside Dark, Tragic Life of Former Patriots Star," Rolling Stone, June 25, 2018, accessed February 08, 2019, <https://www.rollingstone.com/feature/the-gangster-in-the-huddle>.

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## **Chapter 4. The Hunger Strike and Suicide Attempts of Chelsea Manning: Identifications of Transnationalist Queer Heroism**

In 2010 Chelsea Manning, then known as Bradley, was assigned to an Army unit in Iraq, and held unfettered access to classified information pertaining to the U.S. military operations throughout the Middle East. At twenty-two years old Manning leaked hundreds of thousands of documents recording, among other things, U.S. airstrikes in Baghdad and Granai, the Afghan and Iraqi War Logs, and numerous diplomatic cables written by nearly 300 embassies and consulates in over 180 countries. Manning was immediately arrested and by 2013 convicted by court-martial of violations of the Espionage Act and sentenced to thirty-five-years imprisonment, the longest sentence for similar charges levied against whistle blowers in the history of the United States. Manning reentered public consciousness years later after two suicide attempts and a successful five-day-long hunger strike gained her the right to medically transition while still incarcerated. Despite or perhaps because of this, Manning adopted a heroic mythos in the minds of many citizens who ideologically disagreed with the colonial violence continually enacted by US armed forces. When asked for a motive, Manning confessed, “I want people to see the truth ... regardless of who they are ... because without information, you cannot make informed decisions as a public.”<sup>1</sup>

Manning’s heroism and incarceration served as a rhetorical kairos for anti-war activists as they fought to reframe Manning as not a national traitor, but a bonafide queer transgender national hero. According to Greenwald,

By exposing some of the worst atrocities committed by US forces in Iraq, the documents prevented the Iraqi government from agreeing to ongoing legal immunity for US forces, and thus helped bring about the end of the war... The release of the cables shed light on the corruption of Tunisia's ruling family and thus helped spark the Arab spring. In sum, the documents Manning is alleged to have released revealed overwhelming deceit, corruption and illegality by the world's most powerful political actors. And this is why he has been so harshly treated and punished.<sup>2</sup>

Together, queer anti-war activists and those whom I refer to as trans-nationalist activists found themselves at a rhetorical impasse as the heroism of Manning became a chief site of struggle as both parties sought to articulate the fundamental ethos of queer citizenry.

The struggle over the ethos and political loyalties of Manning created a critical space for queer and transgender activists to define and defend the place of transgender people within the national and global order. On one hand, consider the words of Katherine Cross who reflexively noted, "...The trans community had to brace against the inevitable backlash from what was now the most famous trans woman in the world being branded a 'traitor.' What I was not quite prepared for was for her to become a hero, even a saintly figure, to so many of us."<sup>3</sup> Yet on the other hand, the consensus of Manning's sainthood was much more complex with some suggesting that, "Manning is an embarrassment to our community. Manning gives us all a black eye. Manning knowingly put her fellow soldiers at extreme risk by turning spy for Wikileaks."<sup>4</sup> As the repercussions of Manning's leaks continued to evolve alongside the saga of her incarceration framed by her two suicide attempts and hunger-strike, together articulate just what was at stake in the queer heroism of Chelsea Manning.

This essay engages the relationship between anti-war transgender activists and trans-nationalists as it played out in the public archive within the context of Manning's corporeal struggle while incarcerated ultimately framed by her two suicide attempts and hunger strike. The struggle over Manning's ethos and political loyalties highlight contemporary factions between a radical (and racial) queer transgender identity and those transgender activists who coalesce around what Puar termed homonationalism. For Puar, homonationalism essentializes LGBT identities within the regime of state-sponsored homophobia and institutionalized colonial sexual violence. The rhetorical impasse congeals in a dynamic context to situate and critically map

transgender iterations against and within the logic of state-sponsored violence. As opposed to Alcorn and Hernandez, Manning is not yet dead, thus, her cultural wake has continued to shift throughout the writing of this chapter given that discourses about the women continue to unfold. Her suffering, manifest most publically in her suicide attempts and hunger strike, remind us that suicide takes many different forms and that queer self-harm and self-destruction need not result in a biological death, for it still may mobilize publics.

In what follows, I address the connections between heroism and an investment within the contemporary nation-state, attend to critiques from both camps, before offering concluding remarks on the rhetorical consequence of deliberations of heroism.

### **Figuring American Heroism**

Mythic American heroism has its roots in Greco-Roman antiquity and has since been politicized in the constitution of the national citizenry. For example, Rousseau argued that contemporary heroic discourses, while emulating great examples from the past, engenders the “patriotic intoxication which alone can raise men [sic] above themselves, and without freedom is only a vain name and legislation only an illusion.”<sup>5</sup> Freud argued that heroic admiration or “hero worship”<sup>6</sup> is a central part of the human psyche wherein humans’ early leaders have been since “the very beginning of the history of mankind, [sic] been the *Superman* whom Nietzsche only expected from the future.”<sup>7</sup> Moreover, Freud argues that one becomes martyred heroically through either their death or intense suffering wherein their politicized pain is inscribed with a “strong faith in an idea” while awaking and/or solidifying the public’s own faith.<sup>8</sup> Investments in mythic, heroic figures often are imbued deeply with patriotic values, which in turn discipline non-normative subjects. Theorizing a national campaign for the heroism of Manning is what

Puar explains as a type of “sexual exceptionalism” wherein a national (homo)sexuality is yoked to the exceptionalism of the American empire.<sup>9</sup>

Slotkin argues that “nations transform historical experience into symbolic terms of myth then use mythological renderings of the past to organized their responses to real-world crises and political projects.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, one’s suffering through pain can become a historical experience which in turn is mobilized at the national level through heroic registers. The mobilization and narrativization of pain and suffering are central to tales of mythic American heroism. For example, Becker and Eagly define heroes as “individuals who choose to take physical risks on behalf of one or more people, despite the possibility of suffering serious consequences, including death.”<sup>11</sup>

The joining together of pain, suffering, and its imminent risk with a heroic ethos highlights the American investment with masochistic transcendence. Mack explains that the “U.S. American narrative of the ‘self-made man’ is a powerful mythos of self-redemption that places the Puritian value of hard, sufferable, or painful work at the center of the U.S. American cultural identity.”<sup>12</sup> Additionally, Rushing and Frenzt suggest that the joining together of pain and masculine heroism necessitates a fall from hubris to humility. They write

The hero cannot see the error of his [sic] ways on his [sic] own, so external forces converge to place him [sic] in captivity, to force his [sic] descent into enslavement. This is also a descent into his [sic] own unconsciousness, where he [sic] may meet the Other as he [sic] experiences the conditions long suffered by those associated with his [sic] inferior shadow. What is required of him [sic] is no less than an admission of his [sic] own Fall – a journey from hubris to humility.<sup>13</sup>

Heroism and the hero’s relationship to pain is mobilized rhetorically in public culture in ways that are undergirded by the public suffering and humiliation.

Within the national imaginary, heroes/heroines are arguably popular nationalist icons incarnate whose seemingly unlimited physical power is tethered to a nationalist ethic to maintain law and order. Yet, as Ramzi Fawaz described, only articulating heroism through a nationalist register fails to account for the ways in which heroism may be deployed to “offer alternative and radical reinterpretations of the central political terms of liberal democracy.”<sup>14</sup> For the purpose of this chapter, I am interested in the ways in which heroism functions through the register of vulnerability and suffering, as the ground upon which radical queer anti-war solidarity flourished. I am also interested in how traditional liberal nationalist sensibilities functioned to maintain normative vocabularies of sex and U.S. military relations. In the context of Chelsea Manning’s willful act of whistle-blowing, incarceration, suicide attempts, hunger strike, and eventual commutation, I consider alongside each other radical and normative figurations of heroism with the hopes to understand the role of queerness in eradicating and/or maintaining the United States role within the world order.

### **On a Neoliberal, Transnationalist Heroism**

My understanding of transnationalism is undergirded by and indebted to Puar’s homonationalism. Puar, writes “This brand of homosexuality operates as a regulatory script not only of normative gayness, queerness, or homosexuality but also of the racial and national norms that reinforce these sexual subjects.” Thus as the United States enacts its exceptionalism through its war on terror, it “recognizes and incorporates...some, though not all...homosexual subjects.”<sup>15</sup> I further develop this national sexuality by positing a transnationalism because it too maneuvers through national registers of citizenship and the global scene of the war on terror, but takes as its corporeal subject the liberal trans individual as opposed to the homosexual.



The bifurcation of the radical queer movement and the assimilationist tactics of the contemporary “gay rights movement” offer historical insight into neoliberal transnationalist iterations of a citizenry and heroic ethos. Neoliberalism broadly refers to a set of political and economic policies characterized by limited governmental intervention and a weakening of organized labor while reinforcing the concept of a free market.<sup>16</sup> Structures of gay assimilation were predicated upon the neoliberal beliefs of the individual who is optimally autonomous and wholly and solely responsible for her/his actions. Several rhetorical scholars have examined the way in which public discourse and protest mobilization normative neoliberal logics of gender<sup>17</sup> and sexuality<sup>18</sup> at the expense of collective importance.

The register of neoliberal responsibility is fundamental to normative instantiations of heroism within the national imaginary. As an ethic of personal responsibility is foregrounded in conversations of idyllic citizenship and, by extension, morality, a neoliberal heroism disciplines certain acts of protest and civic disobedience as unruly, irresponsible, and injudicious. Conrad, argues that “there are clear connections between economic disenfranchisement, serious impediments to voting rights and education, and the furthering of a neoliberal economy that depends on highly selective resource concentration.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, any sort of neoliberal hero would work not to disrupt the status-quo but would rather maintain such inequalities. The national hero, in this vein, is unquestionably white, normative, and tethered to the nation-state.

### **On a Radical, Queer Heroism**

In contrast to the highly conservative figure of the neoliberal-boot-strap-hero, I now to turn to more radical forms of queer heroism (or what queer acts of heroism would look like), paying attention to the ways in which this type of willful hero stands both within and against the violence of the nation state. Jamal Rashad Jones’s critique of the queer liberation movement and

its heroic ethic is particularly insightful to me to make sense of the radical/liberal divide. Jones argued:

It (liberal acts of protests) distracts from the very things that the Queer Liberation movement was founded on: Anti-imperialism, anti-racism, equal access to housing and healthcare, and struggles against patriarchy. It seems almost irrelevant to me whether or not gay soldiers can “come out” in the military when the U.S. military is not only carrying out two genocidal campaigns for U.S. imperialism and corporate profit, but also when the war budget is draining the funds needed for almost every other service we so desperately need in this country.<sup>20</sup>

In the radical queer tradition, which contemporary gay rights has arguably strayed from, queer heroism entails those acts that disrupt, rather than maintain, the inter-related struggles of anti-racism, anti-imperialism, and global patriarchy. A hero, in this way, would not simply be committed to the national ethic of American empire but rather be committed to dismantling the colonial violence enacted by U.S. imperialism onto global communities of color.

### **The Civic Ethos of Manning as Kairotic**

Heroism was the primary register through which the public deliberated the civic ethos of Chelsea Manning. Katherine Cross and likeminded queer and trans anti-war activists constellated her heroism within a radical commitment to not only bring to light the colonial and systemic war crimes perpetrated by the US but also to place in situ gender and sexual violence experienced by trans people at the hands of the nation state. Other activists and opponents of Manning supported a more traditional, liberal transnationalist iteration of both heroism and civic duty. While both sides recognized that trans people in the US occupied precarious locations, they disagreed over the telos of trans activism and the fundamental nature of trans civic disobedience remained a source of struggle. In short, Manning through her whistle-blowing, incarceration, and hunger-strike, was the manifest messiah for the US trans community or Manning was a national traitor who not only put the lives of US military personnel at risk but also the lives of trans people

seeking to peacefully assimilate into the daily fabric of US life. To clarify the register of a feminist queer heroism, I turn to the public archive chronicling the saga of Manning's incarceration, prison writings documenting systemic gendered and sexual abuse, her five-day hunger strike wherein she successfully fought for the right to medically transition while incarceration, and her eventual commutation and release from military prison. At stake in the deliberation over Manning's heroism are economic and political investments in a military-industrial complex operating within a global order in which US war efforts, to borrow a phrase, leave for dead, queers both domestically and abroad.

### **Transnationalist Articulations of Manning's Treasonist Ethos**

Transnationalist rhetorics of conservative sexual ideologies maintain investments in traditional political channels, capitalist consumer practices, and normative instantiations of sexual identities.<sup>21</sup> Of particular import in the case of Manning is the investment in normative iterations of a national duty and allegiance to the nation state. While critiques against Manning, primarily from transgender activists with ties to the U.S. military, reflect a very real and deeply felt investment in U.S. military operations they also reflect a normative liberal investment in hegemonic thought as it regulates prevailing notions of responsibility in civic life.

A key component in the nationalist critique of Manning disciplined the soldier and individuated her on the basis of her failure to make good personal choices, effectively rendering her a bad transgender feminist, a bad soldier, and a bad citizen. Discourses of Manning's flawed personal autonomy contribute to broader patriarchal rationalizations that one's subjecthood is based solely upon the decisions that they make. Such liberal discourses of free will rationalize the exclusion of non-normative bodies and radical ways of thinking from public consciousness. Kay Brown, a self-described "homosexual transsexual," advanced such a critique

Manning is an embarrassment to our community. Manning gives us all a black eye. Manning knowingly put her fellow soldiers at extreme risk by turning spy for Wikileaks. Many may attempt to portray her as a “whistle-blower” but that is a false picture. She released far too many documents to have carefully considered the potential damage and danger for each one. She did not point out specific wrong doings... she released documents en mass to our enemies. She just said “fuck you” to her responsibilities and her oath to defend the United States and our constitution.<sup>22</sup>

Manning’s association with Wikileaks is particularly important here in the context of transgender dissidence. First, Julian Assange stood accused of sexual assault at the time of Brown’s writing and was, and remains to this day, hiding in the Ecuadorian embassy in England. Second, Wikileaks is widely blamed by individuals on the Left for helping Donald Trump defeat Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential elections. Thus, queer and feminist activists, like Brown, are likely to experience deep ambivalence where Manning is concerned if her association with Assange is in any way at the forefront of public discourse.

Other transnationalist narratives highlighted the “bad politics” of Manning, effectively calling into question her activism and, by extension, her transgender citizenship. Brown continued

At a time when the transcommunity is struggling to prove to the nation that trans folk can serve honorably in the military, Manning is not a shining example. If she really cared about the community, she would know she should take a low profile but instead...Chelsea Manning portrays herself as a “transactivist” ...I don’t know about you. But I’m sick to death of people who transition and within hours of doing so, declare that they are “transactivists”. No, she is NOT. She has done NOTHING to help transfolk. She is not Shannon Minter. She is NOT Joanna Michelle Clark. She did NOT pound the streets fighting anti-LGBT laws. She did NOT found, nor work for, organizations like the ACLU Transsexual Rights Committee. Just because she is trans is no reason to hail her as a hero.<sup>23</sup>

Brown’s comments are replete with several rhetorical consequences. First, they speak of a homogenous “transcommunity” assuming all trans people share similar interests in the military-industrial complex. I realize that enlisting in the military is often the only recourse to viable health insurance, educational, and financial security for queer and trans people, who so often

have been forced into abject poverty. Yet, Brown maintains that all trans people share a common sentiment regarding the morality of US military operations. Brown forecloses a transnational transgender coalition with queer folks who fall victim to U.S. empire and war crimes. Such a commitment references a myopic transgender feminism which fails to account for the way in which whiteness, nationality, and class within queer communities produces and exacerbates queer trauma. Second, Brown engages in a politics of sacrifice, going after Manning for, in essence, not paying her proverbial dues. However true that may be, Manning nonetheless subjected herself to a hunger strike and twice engaged in politicized suicide attempts. Brown's polemic is undergirded by a normative logic of appropriate sacrifice for one's community. The logic of Brown's argument suggests that a pained or corporeal sacrifice is unnecessary and ostentatious while favoring a more liberal protest ethic of working within the system to accomplish one's goals.

Other transgender activists pushed back against Manning and urged her to take more normative and liberal approaches in her political ethos upon her release. Less than a year after Manning's release, Manning announced her candidacy for United States senator. "Good luck, Chelsea. But one trans woman to another, I wish you'd change your mind about running for the Senate, before it's too late," writes transgender journalist Dawn Ennis

How can I say this and you not hate me? Let's find another way to get your name in the headlines and your face in front of the cameras without you spinning your wheels. Frankly, I don't want you to be the latest trans woman to try to make a huge splash after coming out and fall flat on your face. You know it happened to me too, right?<sup>24</sup>

Taken together, because Manning's politics involved engaging in opposition to the state, as opposed to appealing to it, she ought to be either vilified, or removed from the foreground of the fight for transgender rights. Such critiques of Manning are rooted in a traditional

understanding of respectability politics. Anger, rage, and civil disobedience are, for opponents of Manning, antithetical to progressive liberal movements.

Public discourse rooted in opposition to Manning compounds her heroic martyrdom in a few key ways. LGBT-identified individuals choose the elide altogether the torture she endured at the hands of the military state and instead sought to frame Manning as inherently treasonous and ultimately deserving of anything she may have endured. Liberal iterations of her civic ethos were committed to excavating the ways in which Manning failed to uphold the violence of the nation state rather than map the ways of which Manning fell victim to that very apparatus.

Because the suffering, suicide attempts, and near death experience of Manning was the primary focal point in public deliberation for anti-war activists in the figuration of Manning's heroic ethos, I now turn to the archive of suffering before turning to the public deliberation of Manning's martyrdom.

### **Registers of Heroism through Carceral Humiliation**

The carceral suffering of Manning became the primary register through which anti-war advocates constituted the woman's martyrdom. Much of the public's access to the trauma endured by Manning came in the form of her released prison writings. The principle prison writing that served as a catalyst for many queer advocates was that which announced the abuses she had long endured and the commencement of her hunger strike. Manning, in her prison letter, paralleled the anguish experienced by her emotionally physically abusive father to the emotionally abusive carceral state. Manning writes:

I need help. I needed help earlier this year. I was driven to suicide by the lack of care for my gender dysphoria that I have been desperate for. I didn't get any. I still haven't gotten any. I needed help. Yet, instead I am now being punished for surviving my attempt. When I was a child my father would beat me repeatedly for simply not being masculine enough. I was told to stop crying – to 'suck it up.' But I couldn't stop crying. The pain just got worse and worse. Until finally, I just couldn't take the pain anymore.<sup>25</sup>

In this, Manning painfully images the way in which hegemonic masculinity conditions young people assigned male at birth into a socially hardened subjects punished for exhibiting weakness or expressing emotion. Conversely, in this passage Manning also gestures toward a normative investment in fatherhood, one predicated on protecting innocent youth. In the way that fathers are charged with protecting their children so too is the state charged with protecting its vulnerable citizens from vilified external enemies. Yet, just as Manning failed to achieve a desired masculinity in the eyes of her father so too did she fail in the eyes of the state for surviving her suicide attempt.

Additionally, Manning, in her letter, splices together queer and trans sensibilities with a normative appeal to the nation state. Manning writes:

Today, I have decided that I am no longer going to be bullied by this prison—or by anyone within the U.S. government. I have asked for nothing but the dignity and respect—that I once actually believed would be provided for—afforded to any living human being. I do not believe that this should be dependent on any arbitrary factors – whether you are cisgender or transgender; service member or civilian, citizen or non-citizen. In response to virtually every request, I have been granted limited dignity and respect – just more pain and anguish. I am no longer asking. Now, I am demanding. As of 12:01 am Central Daylight Time on September 9, 2016, and until I am given minimum standards of dignity, respect, and humanity, I shall—refuse to voluntarily cut or shorten my hair in any way; consume any food or drink voluntarily, except for water and currently prescribed medications; and comply with all rules, regulations, laws, and orders that are not related to the two things I have mentioned.<sup>26</sup>

Manning exercises the limited amount of agency afforded to someone incarcerated in a military prison. In claiming that today she is no longer going to be bullied by either the prison or governmental officials, Manning critiques the state while simultaneously appealing to that very state apparatus.

Moreover, while her critique is fundamentally and corporeally based in her trans-ness, the logic of her argument is one that situates her gender performativity in the eyes of the state, she is at base a citizen who, despite her crimes, retains fundamental rights. Such a political move by

Manning begs the question posed by West: “are transgender demands for equality and recognition as citizens incompatible with the queering of public cultures?”<sup>27</sup> Take for instance how Amy Brandzel notes that, “citizenship is not only the central structure for reifying the norms of whiteness, heterosexuality, consumerism, and settler colonialism within the United States, but that these norms are brutally enforced against nonnormative subjects” to the point that there is “nothing redeemable about citizenship.”<sup>28</sup> Manning, despite her crimes, was a white (trans) woman whose critique of the state was nonetheless articulated through a politics of citizenry and rights. Her articulation of her right to transition was undergirded by a politics of emotionality and apprehension that is inextricably tethered to her class, race, social standing, and national celebrity. Echoing the concerns articulated by the queer people of color who took to task the universal nature of Alcorn’s death in chapter 2, the concerns of queer and transgender people of color experience more immediate threats to their lives which realistically makes seeking medical transitioning a distant, or perhaps even unrealistic goal.

Through appealing to her civic ethos Manning is able to make clear the politicization of her hunger strike and subjunctive death at the hands of her nation state. Manning continues:

This is a peaceful act. I intend to keep it as peaceful and non-violent, on my end, as possible. Any physical harm that should come to me at the hands of the military or civilian staff will be unnecessary and vindictive. I will not physically resist or in any way harm another person. I have also submitted a ‘do not resuscitate’ letter that is effective immediately. This shall include any attempts to forcibly cut or shorten my hair or to forcibly feed me by any medical or pseudo-medical means. Until I am shown dignity and respect as a human again, I shall endure this pain before. I am prepared for this mentally and emotionally. I expect that this ordeal will last for a long time. Quite possibly until my permanent incapacitation or death. I am ready for this. I need help. Please, give me help.<sup>29</sup>

In politicizing her long-experienced humiliation and assuredly impending death, Manning was, in the words of Barbie Zelizer, in an “about-to-die” moment, a moment centering “not on the finality of death but on its possibility and, conversely, its impossibility.”<sup>30</sup> She, in her letter, is



both about to die and about to become, but is, queerly, refused both. Manning is seemingly frozen at the cusp of her death by hunger which ultimately forces attention to that which pushed her there – the abusive hand of the nation state and the gender violence it is afflicting onto Manning’s body. In addition to materially placing her body on the line within the confines of the prison’s walls, she must also work to make public the vulnerability of her body as it enters into everlasting hunger.

Months before Manning was pushed to the point of self-starvation, Manning wrote in an op-ed for the *Guardian*:

For 17 hours a day [for approximately nine months], I sat directly in front of at least two Marine Corps guards seated behind a one-way mirror. I was not allowed to lay down. I was not allowed to lean my back against the cell wall. I was not allowed to exercise. Sometimes, to keep from going crazy, I would stand up, walk around, or dance, as “dancing” was not considered exercise by the Marine Corps.<sup>31</sup>

Manning’s narrativization of her “no touch torture” assuredly confirms the vast amount of reserve and labor required to psychologically and physically withstand the demands placed upon her body. I am particularly interested in how she highlights the psychological and physical labor involved in performing suffering protest while incarcerated. I consider the corporeal labor of both surviving confinement and hunger as contributions to the discussion of what constitutes carceral performance activism, arguing that these seemingly innocuous everyday processes such as remaining motionless and feeling the pangs of labor are, under times of immense crisis, highly politicized and heroic performances.

While incarcerated Manning wrote at length of the prolonged sexual humiliation she was made to endure. Manning wrote how she was regularly “stripped naked of all clothing” with her “prescription eyeglasses taken away, forced to sit in essential blindness.” Manning also narrated how nightly she was stripped naked at night and made to stand for parade in the nude. Manning remembers

The guard told me to stand at parade rest, with my hands behind my back and my legs spaced shoulder-width apart. I stood at parade rest for about three minutes...The brig supervisor and other guards walked past my cell. He looked at me, paused for a moment, then continued to the next cell. I was incredibly embarrassed at having all these people stare at me naked.<sup>32</sup>

Manning's recounting of her humiliation suggests that sexual abjection is an integral part of queer and transgender experiences while incarcerated within US prisons and was a principle register in which her heroism was founded within the queer imaginary. Manning's body, exposed and displayed before others, a forced sexual visibility, is fundamental to the process of humiliation and negation.

Manning's rhetorical heroism is tethered to the pain and humiliation she endured while incarcerated. The relationalities between rhetorical heroism, institutionalized gendered violence, and humiliation are yoked together in contemporary liberal thought. The rhetorical force of feminist heroism emanates from a material crisis for "people in a state of crisis and anxiety are in need of discourse that can help them make sense of the horror and chaos at hand and that can also lessen the trauma..."<sup>33</sup> Linda Åhäll notes how heroic female agency within political violence toggles between "life-giving" and "life-taking" identities.<sup>34</sup> For example, Avishai Margalit argues that the difference between humiliation and shame hinges on the "moral degradation" inherent in being seen and treated as nonhuman.<sup>35</sup> Lisa Guenther suggests that humiliation objectifies and thereby dehumanizes the person who is targeted, who then becomes "an object of scrutiny, scorn, and possible violence."<sup>36</sup> Moreover, Dianna Taylor notes that humiliation "singles a person out, specifically through a process of negation. One is exposed or displayed before another or others, either real or imagined, one is forced to be visible, but to be so precisely as no one or nothing."<sup>37</sup> The pain of enduring and surviving sexual humiliation is inextricably built into the fabric of sexual violence and feminist rhetorical heroism.

The mythic narrativization of those who have transcended abject humiliation and immense amounts of pain have shifted the rhetorical dynamics of queer understandings of sexual and corporeal violence, most notably the neoliberalization of survivors of sexual and raced-based violence. To be sure, victims of sexual assault may adopt a discourse of heroic resilience, narrating how they may tap into their internal resources in order to “recover” without having to deal with other people. However, as Dianna Taylor notes, “This attitude, while understandable, ultimately functions to exacerbate the individuation produced by humiliation and furthered by neoliberal discourses of individual responsibility and resilience.”<sup>38</sup>

### **Registers of Heroism within the Poiesis of Starvation**

The violence done onto Manning’s body is juxtaposed by the self-inflicted violence done onto bodies through hunger strikes. Hunger strikes are unique in that they create what Michael Vicaro calls, a “rhetoric of display, laying the body out before the public so that it can watch its wasting and bear witness to precarious vulnerability.”<sup>39</sup> The damage of self-starvation is immediate and demonstrative. Within days, the starved begins to experience massive edema, the substantial swelling of one’s tissue. Facial musculature atrophies causing one to appear “haggard, emaciated, and mask-like,” soft tissue, such as skin becomes cold to the touch and hangs in folds from the bone becoming “dry, scaly, thin and elastic” while those starved for prolonged periods of time may experience cytological degeneration in the brain likely to cause emotional distress, depression, and hysteria.<sup>40</sup> Like performance, hunger is made evident only through its disappearing effects. While there exists no external way to measure or objectify hunger, one’s hunger becomes present through the unbecoming and destruction of one’s flesh.

The violence done onto her own body, vis-à-vis a hunger strike, in a perverse way reflects and subverts the violence done onto certain queered bodies by the US and its armed

forces. While queers, particularly queers of color, are systemically rendered abject through economic disenfranchisement, the military is often the only foreseeable recourse for educational, financial, and health security. Yet the military remains an “institution whose fundamental design,” writes Larry Goldsmith, “is to send poor people to die defending the interests of the affluent.”<sup>41</sup> Thus, the violent undoing on Manning’s own queer flesh accrues additional meaning in the broader context of the fundamental logic of the military: that of structuring class, gender, race, and sexuality in ways that protect the nation’s most affluent. In this way, Manning’s hunger strike offers a unique corporeal example of how the nation’s most vulnerable subject can use their body to generate a rhetorical exigence to highlight systemic military and national injustices.

In many ways, the corporeal demands placed onto Manning’s body in her solitary confinement and her hunger strike exemplify immense levels of personal control and unquestionable wherewithal. The discipline required of Manning was directly and inextricably linked to public judgments of her character as a national, queer hero. The politicized pain of Manning’s hunger strike is particularly effective because as Elaine Scarry writes, “whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability.”<sup>42</sup> For example, writing on the labor and discipline required in diabetes management, Amy Borovoy and Janet Hine note that the labor of control and discipline, is largely aligned with positive characteristics, “described as a marker of virtue, will, maturity, and autonomy.”<sup>43</sup> Moreover, the discipline and restraint required to either undergo prolonged solitary confinement or prolonged hunger pains frequently lend to the martyrdom of the individual. For example, David Mizner notes that protesters “risk serious illness and sometimes death” while many others “suffer abuse...as governments grow ever more determined to deny martyrdom” to those suffering injustices.<sup>44</sup> In short, the corporeal labor required of Manning allowed her to become, for many, a symbol of queer perseverance, grit, and

unending nerve. That is to say while Manning's protest certainly preceded its uptake by queer activists, it was through her public appropriation that rendered her a national queer hero made evident through her "survival" at the hands of an abusive state and transphobia.

Gerard Hauser in his influential work on vernacular rhetorics of political prisoners, links together the physical suffering one endured with their consciousness as political prisoners. Hauser notes that "the interaction between political prisoner and prison has a distinctive rhetorical function in that it constitutes the prisoner's identity, gives sustained meaning to the struggle...and ultimately offers proof and refutation of the prisoner's humanness."<sup>45</sup> Similarly, Lisa Corrigan writes that "resistance narratives," vis-à-vis prison memoirs, "are a crucial element in prison resistance because they expose the corruption of power through first-person anecdotes."<sup>46</sup> Publicizing one's prison's narratives, notes Corrigan, "helps to express the worth of the lives of women in prison and empowers women who have been forced to submit to extreme dehumanization and trauma."<sup>47</sup> The degrading and dehumanizing telos of the contemporary prison complex has compelled Dan Berger to note that "people in prison can be and, in fact, act as sincere political actors of their own accord."<sup>48</sup> Thus, while Manning's manifesto, released while incarcerated, accrues meaning against a backdrop of politically and ethically charged rage regarding the inhumane practices of contemporary prison operations, particularly the violence done onto incarcerated women and other queer and gender non-conforming identities. While Hauser, Corrigan, and Berger all offer important insight on the rhetorics produced by prisoners in times of immense crisis, none to my knowledge have theorized the rhetorics of prison vernacular in queer contexts. The symbolic and material conditions which give rise to queer crises, as in the case of Manning, is unique given that the

queer pain and suffering is inextricably bound up within the violence of heteronormativities enacted by the state.

### **Manning's Heroism in the Public Sphere**

The suffering Chelsea Manning endured did not stay in her cell. Rather, queer activists used it within the public sphere to mobilize and rationalize her heroic martyrdom within the queer national imaginary. Stories of her pain and suffering included: activists paralleling the tribulations of Manning with that of David, King of Israel, and Jesus Christ and the violence she faced as living as an out transgender woman. These narratives demonstrated Manning's myriad sufferings by highlighting Manning's immense vulnerability to military, national, and quotidian discriminations.

#### **The Tale of Chelsea and Goliath: The Transcendence of Carceral Suffering**

Manning, in many ways, was the perfect queered body to rally behind. For Manning's supporters, many stressed the fundamentally transcendent nature of her arrest, incarceration, torture, and eventual release. The narratives mirrored that of David and Goliath. In its original Christian-Judeo usage, the story of Goliath's defeat by David represented the fall of paganism to the champion of the God of Israel. In common vernacular the story of David and Goliath now refers to any small underdog, from humble beginnings, who attempts and succeeds in overcoming immense adversity to beat and overthrow their oppressor. In the wake of her commutation, Manning came to represent a heroic queer misfit and societal underdog who, despite immense adversity, stood up to, and survived, genocidal U.S.-led wars, the atrocities she endured while incarcerated in an all-male prison, as well as the quotidian violence of living as a transgender woman. For example, Katherine Cross suggests that "when you consider the conditions she has lived under, between torture and her life's uttermost intimacies being held up

to the glaring lights of angry public scrutiny, Manning's optimism seems almost superhuman."<sup>49</sup> Manning's superhuman-ness, referring to survival in inhumane conditions for over seven years while incarcerated, rhetorically positioned her as heroic in her own right. Additionally, Juj Chang for *Nightline* characterized Manning as a "complex, heroic" figure who has "become a beacon for privacy rights and transgender rights. A hero to many."<sup>50</sup> By situating Manning as a "hero" and "beacon for privacy rights," the discourse places Manning within and against the surveillance-military state, who in this case, becomes the military nation-state. So while women and queer individuals become particularly vulnerable targets in military war policy, Manning was one who shed light on the injustices of U.S. drone warfare and lived to tell the tale.

The narrativization of Manning as an unambiguous national hero who endured immense suffering was foundational in the way in which her proponents sought to frame her within the public sphere. In 2011, Glenn Greenwald penned an op-ed in the *The Guardian* lambasting the treatment of Manning while outlining the myriad ways in which Manning has risen to the level of not only a national hero, but one of worldly proportions. Greenwald narrated Manning's seventeen months of pre-trial imprisonment as one of "sadistic conditions" marked by "intense solitary confinement" and degrading treatment wherein they spend all of their time in solitary confinement with most of that time stripped of their clothing, spending every night and morning completely nude while deprived of all pillows, sheets, and personal possessions, a tactic Amnesty International condemned as inhumane.<sup>51</sup> Manning becomes actualized in the public sphere through the individuation of her pain and suffering while "the greater good" benefits. The global impact of Manning's leaks led Greenwald, two years later in 2013, to note that "If Manning did what he is accused of doing, then he is a consummate hero, and deserves a medal and our collective gratitude, not decades in prison"<sup>52</sup> Manning, actions are espoused through the

logics of compassion, confidence, and encapsulate a heroic ethos through narrating his actions as benefiting the greater good of the global world economy.

It is my read of the public archive that Manning would have not been celebrated as a hero, at least not to such a degree had she not subjected her body to such pain. Sympathetic queer activists narrativized Manning's carceral suffering as representative of other unjust incarcerations, most of whom are people of color, so as to critique the mass incarceration of queer and transgender people within the U.S. prison complex. That is to say, queer activists used the incarceration of Manning and the suffering she endured as a result as a critical discursive moment to engage in an oppositional politics. For example, transgender activist Lynn Cyrin argues that Manning "got imprisoned for an undue amount of time given the 'crime' committed, and then was subject to the psychological torture that's unfortunately business as usual for trans people in the criminal justice system." Cyrin continues writing following the announcement that Obama was commuting Manning's sentence, "The criminal justice system is broken, society is oppressive, and shit is just generally bad. Chelsea's release is, at the very least, a step towards things in the world being slightly less broken."<sup>53</sup> Elsewhere, Jennifer Finney Boylan argues that Manning is "seen as a very public face for the complexity of gender, particularly the injustice facing anyone doing time in a facility for men who is surely, by the measure of her own heart, a woman."<sup>54</sup> And finally, Shannon Minter, a transgender man and legal director for the National Center for Lesbian Rights claims that Manning "has shed light on the serious abuses that transgender people – and in particular, transgender women – suffer daily in our nation's prisons and jails. While Chelsea's experience is extraordinary in many respects, the abuses she has experience as a result of being transgender are commonplace and deserve far more attention."<sup>55</sup>



Minter's framing of Manning's carceral suffering as representative of the incarceration of transgender people in the US is not without rhetorical consequence. In placing Manning who was convicted, among other things, of six counts of espionage, alongside the slew of transgender people incarcerated for low-level crimes, drug-related charges, and sex work, activists fostered a fictive carceral solidarity between all (white) transgender people incarcerated. Such a fictive solidarity elides altogether queer and transgender victims of US bombings particularly in the Middle East. That is to say, Manning's "crime" and incarceration was not an isolated incident but was part of a long history of (white and normative) transgender suffering at the hands of the carceral state.

Visuality also functioned heavily in the concretization of Manning within the US heroic imagination. Sympathetic artists used the incarceration of Manning and the torture she endured at the hands of the nation state to render her victim to and transcendent of grave injustices, mirroring those of Jesus Christ. For example, an anonymous artist depicted Manning (then presenting as Bradley) as a crucified version of Jesus Christ in an urban mural painting. The mural was posted online by Twitter user WLArtForce (WikiLeaks Art).<sup>56</sup> The mural located in Los Angeles, California shows Manning, dressed in her military uniform crucified on a cross painted with the United States flag. Manning stares straight ahead with a steadfastness and a confident resolve. Her mouth is closed and defiant. Ten small white stars circle their head, representing the crown of thorns, with blood running down her face which shows no signs of pain. Crucifixion, a method of capital punishment, is a central narrative in Christianity. The crucifixion of Jesus Christ represents, at the most corporeal and transcendent level, the ultimate act of sacrifice for the atonement of the world's sins. That is to say that Christian thought holds that Jesus knowingly and willingly sacrificed himself through an act of ultimate suffering and

selflessness. Through paralleling Manning (before she came out as trans) with Jesus Christ, this anonymous artist frames Manning's leaking of information as the ultimate act of suffering for the greater good of the world. Zimbardo and Franco note that all humans, in this case, Manning "exhibit the possibility to cultivate a mindset to "help others in need, care for others compassionately, and to develop confidence in one's own ability to take heroic action," encapsulating what the two term "heroic imagination."<sup>57</sup> Manning becomes heroic through her ultimate act of selflessness and her willingness to suffer on the cross. My read of the artist appropriation of Manning's suffering is based on West's conceptualization regarding queer/trans citizenships given these activist-artists deploy together symbols associated with militarism, patriotism, and Christianity to celebrate Manning as a martyr.

The visual arguments and iconicity within Christianity are not value-neutral. Rather whiteness functions as the primary source of arguments undergirding the religious iconicity referencing God, Jesus, and the crucifixion. Within the imaginary of the crucifixion, the White Jesus works to rhetorically signify purity and innocence but also reference the ultimate act of sacrifice for the greater good of the humanity. By coding Jesus as white not only is historically inaccurate but also works as a modality of white supremacy wherein the actions of a single white person can rise to the level of global and worldly proportions.

No signature accompanies the painting but directly below the mural of Manning's crucifixion is the tag "@teach\_one\_art," a link which a year and a half after its circulation online produces no results online. Given that the artist is anonymous and that the photo was circulated by WikiLeaksArt asks those who pass by the piece on the street and those who encounter it digitally to consider the rhetorical force of anonymity. That WikiLeaks and guerilla

street artists function anonymously, compels publics to account for the universality of her cultural martyrdom.

### **Quotidian Heroism and The Banality of Transgender Discrimination**

Another primary way in which activists articulated Manning's heroism was through appealing to the quotidian labor involved in beginning her transition as living as her authentic self. Through articulating Manning suffering under the threat of violence as living as a transgender woman, this discourse mobilized the banality of heroism. For Zimbardo and Franco, the banality of heroism suggests that all humans are potential heroes waiting for a moment in life to perform a heroic deed. Such a conceptualization divorces hegemonic iterations of heroism as primarily associated with military service, calling for a recognition of social heroism, which the authors claim is not as dramatic as military heroism but nevertheless involves loss of financial stability, lowered social status, and loss of credibility.<sup>58</sup> It goes without saying that Manning's heroism was manifest as her viral nature as the individual responsible for one of the largest wartime journalistic archives in history. Yet, the heroism of Manning expanded within the queer imaginary to encompass the queer sensibilities of her transition, both while incarcerated at a military base in the middle of Kansas in Fort Leavenworth and her life as a transitioning woman as an eventual civilian upon her release.

Appeals to the heroic suffering Manning endured as a transgender woman forged lines of identification among transgender civilians resisting quotidian sexism laced with cisgenderism. In the days following the commutation of her prison sentence by President Obama, *NBC News* wrote that Manning, in addition to her efforts to end US backed wars, also "serv[es] as a potent symbol of [transgender people's] struggles for acceptance."<sup>59</sup> Like the transgender martyr Brandon Teena that preceded Manning by two decades did, Manning came to represent, at a

national level, the omnipresent threat of violence that so frequently accompanies transgender lives. Because this discourse situated transgender “acceptance” within the broader context of suffering under transphobic and the violence of normative cisgenderism, this discourse encapsulated what Zimbardo and Franco term the banality of heroism.

Queer publics emphasis on the banality of Manning’s heroism became a central tenet in the public’s deliberation over her ethos as both a military hero and bonafide queer martyr. That is to say, while Manning’s ethos as a military hero was manifest, publics also highlighted other types of suffering – sufferings that all transgender people experience, whether civilian or active duty. For example, Chase Strangio, a transgender man and ACLU attorney, claims, “She’s always been a hero to me. Her story really does reflect so much of the systemic discrimination that transgender people face – struggles growing up, suppression of her gender that prompted her to join the military, and facing particularly egregious conditions in prison.”<sup>60</sup> This narrativization of Manning suggested that Manning was, in a sense, “every transgender person” and by framing her struggles with systemic gender discrimination, Manning’s whiteness and pain could rise to the national level and could serve as a focal point around which transgender people across the world could organize: particularly the incarceration of queer, transgender bodies.

Other adulatory narratives that hailed Manning as a national queer hero were also based in normative gendered assumptions of femininity. For example, three months after her release from prison, Chris Thomas, writing for *Out Magazine* claims, “Manning has endured and become a symbol of hope not just to the transgender community, but also to the entire world...In the meantime...she fights back against Trump’s transgender military bans and perfects her eye shadow skills through YouTube tutorials.”<sup>61</sup> The juxtaposition of opposing Trump and perfecting one’s makeup skills is ambivalent at best. On one hand, by foregrounding Manning’s use of

makeup, Thomas humanizes the recently released by highlighting the labor involved in quotidian practices such as makeup application. Yet, on the other hand, it represents a broader insidious pattern wherein recently transitioned woman suddenly have their appearance critiqued in public journalism at a level previously unknown before their transition was public.<sup>62</sup>

While queer activists sought to frame the the way Manning's suffering coalesced with her national ethos, many rhetors domesticated her activism, and therefore, her suffering given that failed to account for the ways in which she challenged and undermined U.S. empire. In many ways, Manning was working in the interest of those bodies (both queer and not) on the ground who fell victim to the US who bombed their homes and communities with impunity. Consider that Manning confessed that, "I want people to see the truth ... regardless of who they are ... because without information, you cannot make informed decisions as a public."<sup>63</sup> The documents Manning released detail, among other things, the Iraq War Logs which tell of the murdering of nearly 700 innocent children, pregnant women, and the mentally ill by US forces for simply coming too close to checkpoints between 2004 and 2010.<sup>64</sup> As she struggled to stay alive throughout her incarceration, Manning arose to the level of national hero which divorced in its entirety (except for Greenwald) the ways in which she challenged and undermined U.S. empire.

### **Conclusion: Suffering in the National Consciousness**

I conclude having read and researched the two suicide attempts and hunger strike of Chelsea Manning more times than I can count. Each time I struggle to account for the embodied trauma of experiencing one's imminent suicide, enduring years of "no touch torture" at the hands of abusive prison guards, and the desperation one must feel to choose unending hunger rather than rather live another day as a gender with which she does not identify.

While it is true that Manning did not “successfully commit suicide.” She, unlike Alcorn and Hernandez, is still with us and has for the last year walked as a free woman. Yet, similarities between her hunger strike and suicide attempts and the suicides of the others exist. Most notably, Manning’s pain and suffering gave rise to her rhetorical agency. Agency, as articulated by Karlyn Kohrs Cambell’s oft-cited thesis, “refers to the capacity to act, that is, to have the competence to speak or write in a way that will be recognized or heeded by others in one’s community.”<sup>65</sup> Through the saga of her incarceration and commutation, her pain and suffering served as an occasion for discourse for publics to make sense of her queer and civic ethos.

While the public discourse in the cultural wake of Manning’s hunger strike, two suicide attempts, and eventual commutation were deeply polarizing. The public narrated Manning in two contradictory ways: by queer activists who sought to frame Manning through an ethos of heroism having survived years of heroic and quotidian suffering which was complicated by LGBT activists who claimed her a treasonous criminal. I argue that the national discourse surrounding her case would have been far less clear and polarized without her publicized suffering. I argue that queer public discourse surrounding Manning appropriated and mobilized Manning’s uniquely transgender suffering in ways that concretized her as a cultural martyr while appealing to the trope of tragic “heroism.” In narrativizing Manning as one who suffered, endured, and ultimately transcended inhumane state-sanctioned torture, the heroic tale of Manning’s carceral suffering produced connectivity between civic notions of duty and queer victims of the nation state. While it was true that several queer activists used the suffering of Manning as a focal point around which they organized, others refused to recognize the heroic ethos of Manning.

Encountering the pain and suffering of another is always already flawed. There is no way to know the extent of the trauma Manning experienced while incarcerated nor the trauma she

experiences living as a transgender woman. In my read of Manning's well-documented oeuvre of suffering, my analysis suggests that one's pain and suffering is inextricably bound within one's national heroic ethos. Suffering became the object of focus for proponents of Manning, as they sought to materialize the ordinary and extraordinary injustices faced by this "hero." Yet, LGBT dissention persisted. Several transgender women resisted the mobilization around her suffering as they engaged in an oppositional politics regarding Manning as a cultural hero.

My reading of Manning's pain and suffering is based upon a vexed ethic of queer citizenship. It is, it seems, that by making evident her suffering at the hands of the nation-state Manning was even able to lay claim to citizenship status. In the most interesting rhetorical paradox, by suffering under the violent matrices of state-based violence, Manning appealed to the very logics which rendered her abject, and by so doing became a national martyr for many queer activists.

I have contended throughout this dissertation that the dead or dying queer body is a deeply contested cultural conjuncture. As stated in chapter one of this dissertation, I argue that the dying or ailing queer body is always already situated within the triangulation of queer emotionality, the nation state, and the politics of normative assimilation. The dying queer body is an agitating queer body in that it commands attention to the cultural logics which determine whose life is worthy of living. The case of Chelsea Manning presented here further adds to the ever growing commitment of archival queers as we continue to research and document, among other things, the nuances and ebbs and flows of queer pain, trauma, and emotionality as they pertain to our heroic and quotidian selves.

## Notes

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## Chapter 5. Conclusion: Queer Lessons in/of Suicide

Bravo's *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* aired in its original format from 2003 – 2007.

Through its success, the show became a national point of entry for many types of audience to experience a very specific type of sanitized white queerness. Yet I remember in 2003, at thirteen-years-old, watching the program with my mother every other weekend during our court ordered visitations and felt like I shared a secret with the Fabulous Five and it was through my mother's love for the show that I felt a semblance of safety not only with my own sexuality but with my relationship with her and the world at large. The show provided many opportunities for white queer youth to watch on TV white queer experiences that did not end with rejection and death. The show while "progressive" in a few key liberal ways, was nonetheless markedly classist, racist, transphobic, and found success through pandering to non-threatening stereotypical white gayness.

In 2018, streaming service Netflix rebooted the program and like its predecessor the show received wildly popular ratings and critical fanfare. In addition to having a racially diverse cast (unlike its predecessor,) the stories now told are undergirded by an ethic of care, inclusivity, and respect. Karomo Brown, the show's culture and lifestyle expert shocked many of his fans last years when he took to his Instagram page to honor the twelve-year anniversary of his attempted suicide. Brown, in the video reminds his almost 2 million followers:

As you see me on Queer Eye, helping people with their mental health, and you see me on my social media helping people, its because its important to me. Not just because I'm trained in this field but because I know so many of us suffer from mental health issues and we just don't know where to turn. And every day it seems darker and darker but I want you to know that things do get better. If you get help and you do the work daily your life can change I'm living proof of that.<sup>1</sup>

Brown's self disclosure was widely praised among the various media outlets who reported the story. Brown's own suicide story offers a vexed lesson at the close of this dissertation. Yes, it does take work to stay alive but also relying on neoliberal logics which place the burden of survival completely on the shoulders of the struggling fails to account for the ways in which regimes of oppression place dictates on many of our lives in unequal and intersecting ways.

Up to this point, I have engaged various manifestations of queer suicide, taking as my focus the deaths or attempts at death of two transgender women and a man whose sexuality was posthumously queered. I have attempted to map how, in their respective cultural wakes, publics treaded the precarious waters of eulogizing (in the case of Alcorn and Hernandez) and politicizing (in the case of Manning) the deaths or near-death experiences of these queer bodies. In addition to appealing to the state for legal recognition (*vis-à-vis* federal protection from conversion therapies by way of Alcorn and the right to transition while incarcerated at a military prison by way of Manning), publics also deployed rhetorical wakes to reify extant systems of racist pornographic ideologies as occurring in the case of Hernandez.

In this concluding chapter, I will revisit my research questions, as well as the major themes and concepts from the preceding chapters to lay the theoretical foundations for some speculative comments on the role queer suicide plays within contemporary political culture.

### **Contextualizing the Cultural Wake**

*How does queer suicide function as both a reification and subversion of extant power structures?*

*How does suicide mobilize affects within and outside of queer publics?*

In this dissertation, I have argued that the primary way in which publics acquiesced the deaths of these individuals was through the cultural wake. Wakes are a symbolically powerful

death ritual that through their enactment produce affective and collective social memory. Accompanying the usual emotions of profound loss, grief, and sadness, funerary performances are also a time of immense animation and collective mobilizing.<sup>2</sup> As much as this dissertation is about queer suicide it perhaps more about public responses to queer suicide made visible through their cultural wakes which participate in the maintenance and disruption of queer public memory. Considering that the juxtaposition of enervation and motivation in times of loss and death offer a unique rhetorical exigence in contemporary politics given that “Americans, of every culture, lean toward the belief that death is not necessarily the end, but rather, a time of change.”<sup>3</sup> Like the illuminating case of Mamie Till Bradley’s, public performance of funerary rituals are bound within the cultural logics of race, sexuality, and gender. Till Bradley, challenged the meaning of lynched black bodies by symbolically transforming her son’s body from a “celebrated spectacle of white hatred” into a “symbol of resistance and community.”<sup>4</sup> Through making public one’s suffering and the violence done onto her son, she made public her grief and made complicit the broader culture in which her son died. The racialized, gendered, sexed, and class-based logics undergirding the politics of emotionality were at play in these various wakes. As the bereaved sought to make sense of the loss of another, they reified extant systems of oppression (as was the case with Hernandez) or they used the deaths to subvert oppressive logics of grievability (as was the case with Alcorn).

The cultural wake of queer suicide also mobilizes affects in multiple ways that ultimately challenge the distinction between murder and suicide. Overall, the suicides or suicide attempts of Alcorn, Hernandez, and Manning were all exigent occasions for discourse as various publics in recent years used the threat of suicide as opportunity to challenge and/or reify extant systems of power domination. The rhetorical maneuver from private pain to public feeling gestures to the

rhetorical dynamic of death in public life. This dissertation has taken an arguably highly individuated, micropolitical phenomenon, queer people killing themselves, and situated it within macropolitical sites of cultural struggles over gender, race, and sexuality. In reading queer suicide as a complex cultural conjuncture, I have suggested that discourses about dead and dying queers occur in response to racial oppression via white supremacy and mass incarceration, and compulsory heterosexuality via normative expectations of gender, sexuality, and citizenship. Taken together, the case studies here contribute to extant literature on the rhetoricity of suicide, mourning, and systemic violence. The apprehension of pain, to borrow the phrase from Judith Butler, is a deeply politicized and vexed conjuncture bound by interrelated structures of oppression that manifest in any public's attempt to mourning the queer dead.

### **The Absence of Queer Bodies and the Politics of Representation**

*How does queer suicide participate in the maintenance and disruption of queer public memory? How do discourses and performances of queer suicide function within queer history, or the making of history? How does grief function to rationalize queer subjects? How does suicide operate within the fundamental ambivalences of queerness? How does queer suicide, situated within regimes of racism, heterosexism, homonormativity, and expansive military and criminal justice systems serve to sustain and challenge such regimes?*

Central to this dissertation was the archival impulse to track the marked absence of suicidal or dying queer bodies within queer history. Queer subjectivities, seized by the AIDS epidemic and the historic policing and punishment of “deviant sexualities” of indigenous peoples, enslaved Africans, and immigrants of color were not only an integral part to the disappearances of queer folk but also to the cultural projects of colonization, genocide, and enslavement. It is possible to archive these bodies within two different registers. First, these



suicides are, at least to some degree, acts of resistance, which are deeply politicized and polemical in nature. For example, Alcorn as she leapt to her death called for change and asked queer and non-queer publics to avenge her death in hopes of change for US queer youths. Additionally, Manning attempted suicide and twice and waged a five-day-long hunger strike for the right to transition while incarcerated. Others may see this archive as an archive of oppression. As queer folks continue to fall victim to systemic oppression which often manifests in mass incarceration fueled by white supremacy, queered bodies like Hernandez may see suicide as the only viable option. The ambivalent nature of the reads of these suicides parallels the ambivalent nature of queerness in general. Maria Lugones writes that

If we think of people who are oppressed as not consumed or exhausted by oppression, but also as resisting or sabotaging a system aimed at molding, reducing, violating, or erasing them, then we also see at least two realities: one of them has the logic of resistance and transformation; the other has the logic of oppression. But, indeed, these two logics multiply and encounter each other over and over in many guises.<sup>5</sup>

In this dissertation, I have attempted to map the way in which these registers collide into and away from each other in myriad ways. I wanted to archive those contemporary queers lost to suicide while simultaneously identifying the insidious patterns of symbolic representational practices that run the queer archive and popular imaginary. Rather than reading intent onto particular suicidal people, I have analyzed the way in which publics reckoned with the trauma was dead queers and the politics of memorializing them within public memory.

Alcorn's absence, made present through her suicide, was politicized to critique conversion therapies and the violence of conservative zealous parenting. Hernandez's absence, made present both through his solitary confinement and eventual carceral suicide attempt, was mobilized in the public archive in ways that reified the erotics of racism within the white imaginary. Finally, Manning's absence (through her incarceration) and presence (through her

hunger strike and eventual commutation) rose to represent a feminist heroism within and against the United States' military and colonial conquest. If one believes, as I do, that queerness is mobilized through modalities of ephemera, than the cultural imperative to represent and honor the recently lost suicidal subject is to represent the ephemeral subject. Muñoz writes that queer ephemera is

linked to alternate modes of textuality and narrativity like memory and performance: it is all of those things that remain after a performance, a kind of evidence of what has transpired but certainly not the thing itself. It does not rest on epistemological foundations but is instead interested in following traces, glimmers, residues, and specks of things.<sup>6</sup>

The presence of queer suicide within the national public sphere represents the ephemeral suicidal subject in ways that reify and intensify anti-queer ideologies. Claire Sisco King argues cultural texts may un-queer otherwise queer sensibilities when they “discipline queer reading strategies and advocate a version of homosexuality that complies with heteronormative expectations.”<sup>7</sup> I suggest that the cultural wakes of these various queers worked to discipline or un-queer these deaths (either material or symbolic) by suicide. The work done in the memorialization of these queers, in the words of Chandan Reddy, “produced a gendered and sexual political unconscious, which has restricted our ability to discover the alternative solidarities that generated cross-racial alliances challenging liberal and cultural nationalist models of alliance and solidarity.”<sup>8</sup>

The lesson for rhetorical and cultural studies lies at the intersection of 1) critical practice and praxis in the rhetorical archive and 2) the centrality of agentic queer suffering and death. This dissertation offers a queer rhetorical history of queer suicide as it is mobilized within the public archive. I mapped the “rhetorical practice of remembering”<sup>9</sup> to borrow the phrase from Jessica Enoch, in the cultures surrounding contemporary queer suicide. I also highlighted the

ways in which the archives themselves participate in rhetorical work, namely the disciplining and un-queering of suicides.

I continue to believe, as Robert Ivie does, that “there is something worthwhile about thinking of rhetorical scholarship as cultural invention.”<sup>10</sup> Certainly, it is my posture that I wish for a world wherein queer people were not persecuted and pushed to the brink of their own death. Thus, while I call for the end of anti-queer violence and white supremacy and racist domination, I realize this dissertation will not solve our world’s problems. However, in this dissertation I have attempted to contribute to new directions in rhetorical scholarship that is undergirded by the critical ethic of cultural studies that moves beyond context and recognizes how certain acts, such as queer suicide, are vexed conjunctures. Considering that “Conjuncturalism looks to the changing configuration of forces that occasionally seeks and sometimes arrives at a balance or temporary settlement,”<sup>11</sup> I consider, for example, Hernandez’s suicide more than occurring in the context of a prison, but the product of white supremacist pornographic logics, the mass incarceration of people of color, and widespread emotional divestment from same-sex intimacy.

The second rhetorical lesson lies in the precarity of queer suffering and agentic action. The precarious nature of suicide is that at one level, the individual “took things into their own hands,” to turn a phrase. Which one could read as a clear capacity to act. Yet, Erin Rand reminds us that rhetorical agency is “not a property that a rhetor can possess or that arises from within an individual, but rather it is something that one might exercise within a set of conditions that exceed one’s control.”<sup>12</sup> While the ethos of the suicidal subjects in this dissertation sometimes did, but often times did not, align with a queer telos of radical ambivalence it was the case that these suicidal instantiations frequently begat highly normative and even at times anti-queer logics.

For example, in chapter two, I argued that Leelah Alcorn rose to represent the violence of gender conversion therapies through repeated rhetorical appeals to a whiteness-derived innocence. Her whiteness posthumously posited her as civically grievable within the queer national imaginary. Through mobilizing affects of grievability and innocence, queer activists engaged in liberal agitation, effectively appealing to the state for redress. In chapter two, I advanced a theoretical argument suggesting that the conjuncture of queer suicide is inextricably tethered to the political interests of queer emotionality, liberal appeals to the nation state, and the politics of normative assimilation. The recognition of certain queer lives as grievable, at the most basic level, is predicated on social frames of intelligibility which are “politically saturated.”<sup>13</sup> Moreover, in chapter two I contend that the political recognizability of another’s pain is inextricably bound by racist ideologies.

In chapter three, I argued that the sexuality of Aaron Hernandez inspired controversy among queer and non-queer publics as both sought to excavate the conflicting accounts of the man’s “secret sexuality.” The collective queering and un-queering of Hernandez adopted a politics of ambivalence that at times, called into question the mass incarceration of men of color, while at other times reifying damaging tropes of perversion and hypersexualized men in the homonormative sexual fantasy. The rhetorics producing Hernandez’s post-mortem queer subjectivity were marked by competing and deeply ambivalent logics of perverse homophobia and queer sympathies. Publics toggled between the two, unable to totally absolve the man from his sins on one hand and on the other hand were unable to leave the man for dead in the queer imaginary. The convergence of disparate responses to queer death and sexuality build upon one another effectively compounding the multiple meanings of Hernandez’s queer suicide. That is to say the collective queering of a deceased individual adopts a politics of ambivalence that may

enable radical resistance to logics of white supremacy and the mass incarceration of bodies of color while at the same time falling victim to those very logics. Furthermore, the sexualization of Hernandez appealed to and reinforced white erotics of racist thought as that particular discourse mobilized pornographic tropes of butch and overly-masculine men of color as sexual objects of desire despite the fact that they marshalled sympathy for the man. While white public appealed to Alcorn's whiteness-derived-innocence to agitate for federal protection from gender conversion therapies, queer publics appealed to Hernandez's brown Hispanic subjectivity to enact their racist and pornographic prison fantasies.

Finally, in chapter four, I argued that public discourse in Chelsea Manning's immediate aftermath of her commutation and release from prison engaged in traditional logics of neoliberal transcendence while appealing to tropes of tragic heroism, yoking pain with heroic subjectivity. I argued in chapter four that the Manning's suicide attempts, hunger strike, and public deliberation thereof were inextricably bound within and against a patriotic investment in the criminal justice system. I argued that queer public discourse surrounding Manning appropriated and mobilized Manning's transgender suffering in ways that concretized her as a cultural martyr while appealing to the trope of tragic "heroism," narrating how she transcended the cruel and inhumane treatment at the hands of the United States carceral system.

### **Future Research**

I wanted to tell the story of these individuals in a way that offers insight into how the world works, building a narrative "literally from flesh and blood experiences."<sup>14</sup> Yet I was constantly confronted with double binds in my writing and feel like key components remain missing. The missing parts that still pull my attention may be marked as "areas of future research."

For example, while I believe that public discourse about Aaron Hernandez effectively constituted the man within the public sphere, I feel that the man's queerness is also retrievable and manifest in the *survival strategies that the man practiced*.<sup>15</sup> A future analysis of Hernandez, a queer Latinx man, could read Hernandez's affinity for crime, drugs, and life's excesses as a particular kind of performative disidentification. For adopting a street ethos is unequivocally a survival strategy that minority subjects engage in to negotiate what Muñoz calls a "phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship."<sup>16</sup> Thus, while traditional rhetoricians recognize such a read as "speculation," other interpretive sensibilities recognize that theories of the flesh "articulate who we are and where we come from as significant sources of knowledge."<sup>17</sup> Thus, focus on the embodied practices of Hernandez's latinidad and life of crime illuminates the necessity of thinking about Latinx subjectivity beyond public discourse because performance and embodied rhetorics matter too.

Elsewhere, a future read of the saga of Chelsea Manning could take a similar route. While public discourse was formative in the appropriation of her national ethos, a corporeal read of Manning could take up Manning's pain, suffering, and hunger means in the context of carceral gendered violence. Her starving body thus would be the object of analysis, not public responses thereof. The politicized starving body would call for a reimagining of performance, one that conceptualizes the labor accompanying solitary prison confinement and the politicized pangs of hunger.

I began this dissertation because I felt like the story of queer suicide needed to be told. I didn't know how I would write the story or what my conclusions would be. After having written the document I still feel like key components remain missing. I, rather obviously, remain

committed to ending violence against queer communities which includes abolishing racist and colonial ideologies as well. Parts of me, namely the pessimistic cultural critic, resists clinging too tightly to discourses of futurity and “betterment” that accompany campaigns like the “It Gets Better” [IGB] project. Sure, the telos of the campaign is arguably normative and I get that anti-normativity is a canonical belief within queer theory/activism.<sup>18</sup> Yet, other parts of me believe that suicidal queers, adult and youth alike, perhaps do need to here that “it gets better.” Amy Brandzel writes that queer theory’s scorched-earth critique levied against the campaign’s “simplistic and assimilationist appeal” would have likely changed had they presumed the presence of a suicidal gay youth or the parents of a child who committed suicide.<sup>19</sup> I conclude with a counterintuitive suggestion that while critiques of IGB are often apt, queers, across the spectrum, would do well to heed its message, that the rough times do often pass.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Karomo Brown, Instagram. August 30, 2018. [https://www.instagram.com/p/BnHPAAqA9Vr/?utm\\_source=ig\\_embed&utm\\_campaign=embed\\_video\\_watch\\_again](https://www.instagram.com/p/BnHPAAqA9Vr/?utm_source=ig_embed&utm_campaign=embed_video_watch_again).

<sup>2</sup> Jacqueline S. Thursby, *Funeral Festivals in America: Rituals for the Living* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 31.

<sup>3</sup> Thursby, *Funeral Festivals in America*, 33.

<sup>4</sup> Christine Harold and Kevin Michael Deluca, "Behold the Corpse: Violent Images and the Case of Emmett Till," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 8, no. 2 (2005): 283.;doi10.1353/rap.2005.0075.

<sup>5</sup> Maria Lugones, *Pilgrimages Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition against Multiple Oppressions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 12.

<sup>6</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (1996): 10, doi:10.1080/07407709608571228.

- <sup>7</sup> Claire Sisco King, "Un-Queering Horror: Hellbent and the Policing of the "Gay Slasher", *Western Journal of Communication* 74, no. 3 (2010): 250, doi:10.1080/10570311003767159.
- <sup>8</sup> Chandan Reddy, *Freedom with Violence: Race, Sexuality, and the US State* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 30.
- <sup>9</sup> Jessica Enoch, "Releasing Hold: Feminist Historiography Without the Tradition," in *Theorizing Histories of Rhetoric*, ed. Michelle Ballif, 58–73 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2013), 59.
- <sup>10</sup> Robert L. Ivie, "Productive Criticism at the Crossroads: Interventions, Trajectories, and Intersections," *Review of Communication* 16, no. 1 (2016): 105, doi:10.1080/15358593.2016.1183910.
- <sup>11</sup> Lawrence Grossberg, "Does Cultural Studies Have Futures? Should It? (Or Whats The Matter With New York?)," *Cultural Studies* 20, no. 1 (2006): 5, doi:10.1080/09502380500492541.
- <sup>12</sup> Erin J. Rand, *Reclaiming Queer: Activist & Academic Rhetorics of Resistance* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2014), 12.
- <sup>13</sup> Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2016), 1, 6
- <sup>14</sup> Karma R. Chávez, "Remapping Latinidad: A Performance Cartography of Latina/o Identity in Rural Nebraska," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (2009): 168, doi:10.1080/10462930902774866.
- <sup>15</sup> José Esteban. Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 4.
- <sup>16</sup> José Esteban. Muñoz, *Disidentifications Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 4.
- <sup>17</sup> Karma R. Chávez, "Remapping Latinidad: A Performance Cartography of Latina/o Identity in Rural Nebraska," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (2009): 168, doi:10.1080/10462930902774866.
- <sup>18</sup> Wiegman, R., and E. A. Wilson. "Introduction: Antinormativitys Queer Conventions." *Differences* 26, no. 1 (2015): 1-25. doi:10.1215/10407391-2880582.
- <sup>19</sup> Amy L. Brandzel, *Against Citizenship the Violence of the Normative* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2016).



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