

Against AIDS and its Metaphors: From Gay Fear to Power in Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart*

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Abstract

Larry Kramer's Tony-winning play, *The Normal Heart*, based on historical events during the outbreak of AIDS, portrays the New York gay community's indictment under the social prejudice and governmental indifference to the crisis. By presenting the gay community's struggles to raise public attention to the disease and the gay activists' fight for their own rights, the play discloses how and why AIDS and gay people have continuously been stigmatized and criminalized by medical reports, mass media, and governmental institutions. As Susan Sontag points out, AIDS is not just a disease but replete with punitive metaphors, which are socially and culturally constructed in order to condemn the disease as the result of perversity and moral degradation. The metaphors associated with AIDS stigmatize those who are affected and thus often inhibit them from seeking proper medical treatment. Only when the metaphors are rejected, the patients will be able to resist the disease. Following Sontag's argument, this study will examine the playwright's attempt to demystify such socio-cultural metaphor of AIDS, and also discuss how the playwright challenges the dominant AIDS discourse. Finally, the study will demonstrate that the play functions to help eliminate the prejudice against persons with AIDS and empower the gendered Others against the stigmatization of AIDS and its metaphors.

Keywords: Larry Kramer, *The Normal Heart*, AIDS, Gay fear, Catharsis of theater

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I. Introduction

Larry Kramer's Tony-winning play, *The Normal Heart*, set in the early years of AIDS crisis, explores the complicated relationship between AIDS and American culture. Based on historical events during the outbreak of AIDS, the play portrays the New York gay community's indictment under the social prejudice and governmental indifference to the crisis. By presenting the gay community's struggles to fight for their own rights, the play discloses how and why AIDS and gay people have continuously been stigmatized and criminalized by medical reports, mass media, and governmental institutions. As Susan Sontag points out, AIDS is not just a disease but replete with punitive metaphors, which is socially and culturally constructed in order to condemn the disease as the result of perversity and moral degradation. Because AIDS has mainly affected two marginal social groups (homosexual men and drug users) in its early years, the punitive metaphors have fastened upon the disease and its victims. Sontag thinks that the metaphors related to AIDS not only stigmatize the disease but also stigmatize those who are affected and thus the metaphors often inhibit the PWAs (Persons with AIDS) from seeking proper medical treatment. Only when the metaphors are rejected, the patients will be able to overcome the disease. In terms of Sontag, Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* demonstrates how and why the disease is stigmatized and demonized. By unfolding the underlying realities of AIDS, Kramer intends to utilize the stage as a medium to empower the PWA to fight against AIDS and its metaphors.

The Normal Heart is a pièce a clef that chronicles Kramer's own experience in the period of AIDS crisis. The play dramatizes the anger, fear and grief felt by those who struggle against AIDS and the stigmatization enforced by the government and the dominant media. It follows with the story of the protagonist, a gay Jewish writer named Ned Weeks, a Kramer's stand-in, who is angry with the indifference of the mass media and the government when a mysterious disease, later named AIDS, kills most of his friends. With some gay friends, he founds an organization, much like GMHC¹, whose purpose is to help PWAs to cope with their plight and pressure the government to deal with the epidemic. Ned begins a series of onslaughts on Mayor Koch's administration and some influential mass media, such as *New York Times*, for their ignoring the AIDS problem. Following the advice of Dr. Emma Brookner, the most experienced physician with AIDS, Ned urges the abstinence of gay men in order

¹ GMHC, the Gay Men's Health Crisis, is a non-profit and volunteer-supported AIDS service organization that has led the U.S. to fight against AIDS. The organization was founded in January, 1982, shortly after the outbreak of AIDS epidemic. The founders were Nathan Fain, Larry Kramer, Lawrence D. Mass, Paul Popham, Paul Rapoport and Edmund White. Paul Popham was chosen as the president.

to stop the transmission of the disease. His thesis that suspects that promiscuity among gay men as the cause of the disease provokes fierce debates among gay communities. His political insistence is strongly opposed by his colleagues who regard sexual freedom as the tenet of gay liberation. Although he zealously campaigns for gay rights, he is asked to leave the organization because most of his colleagues disagree with his political tactic. Concurrent with the story of Ned's activism is his love affair with a *New York Times* reporter, named Felix Turner, and his conflict with his older brother, Ben, who thinks of homosexuality as a mental disease. The latter part of the play is imbued with the atmosphere of fear and grief. The death toll keeps rising, but the government still remains inactive in the face of AIDS crisis. While Ned is excluded from the organization, he finds that his lover is diagnosed with AIDS. His fear of losing his lover intensifies his anger. He blames himself for not fighting hard enough to have his voice heard. The play ends with his marriage to the dying Felix and his reconciliation with his brother who affirms his hope for a health future for gay men.

Since it premiered in 1985, *The Normal Heart* has received worldwide critical attention. It was acclaimed by critics and theater reviewers as one of the significant political plays of the decade. Lawrence Mass indicates that the play, which focuses on the AIDS crisis from a gay male outlook, is "explosive powerful and uniquely important" (Mass, 1997, p.47). Roman thinks that the play is significant because it is the first literary response to AIDS and the first AIDS drama that reaches to the mainstream audience. Critics pay much attention to such topics as AIDS politics, sexual liberation and promiscuity, gay self-hatred, homophobia and heterosexism. However, few of them have discussed the power of theatricality of this play.

More than a quarter of a century after AIDS first hit in New York City, the political effect of the play is not so urgent and compelling as it was first produced. When AIDS has become a chronic condition rather than a lethal disease, and when it is more understandable than ever, the propaganda part of this 1985's play seems dated. The play, however, has been produced hundreds of times around the world and remains the longest-running play in the history of the Public Theater. It was revived in Broadway in 2011 and received the Tony Award for Best Revival of a Play in the same year. It was also reproduced as a television film in 2014. The theater reviewer, Ben Brantley, comments that the revival of the play proves that the fight against AIDS and its metaphors remain incomplete. The success of the play shows that it must possess literary merit apart from the political debates raised from the play. Therefore, I will approach this play in terms of the power of theatricality, examining how the playwright challenges the mainstream discourse of AIDS and exploring the gender discrimination through theatrical representations.

This study is to examine how Kramer employs the theater as a medium to uncover the underlying truth of AIDS, to induce the pathos in the audience and to help the PWAs to confront its threat. The questions to be discussed are as follows. Why does Kramer use the theater as a medium to promote his political position on AIDS crisis and to campaign for gay rights? Why does he employ the mode of realism, which is condemned by David Roman as the dramatic form “imbedded in the prevailing ideology of naturalized heterosexuality in dominant culture” (Roman, 1992, p.210), to change the negative perceptions of AIDS and PWAs constructed in mainstream culture? Can the play remove the stigmatization of AIDS and PWAs? Can the play help the PWAs to overcome the fear of death and empower them to resist AIDS? To approach these questions, the study will engage Aristotle’s dramatic theory of catharsis and some discussions about AIDS from cultural critics, such as Sontag and Gould to analyze the play. The discussions will be based on critical method of close reading and information integration. The following discussions will first examine the playwright’s attempt to demystify the socio-cultural metaphors of AIDS. Then the study will discuss how the play achieves the theatrical pedagogy and challenges the dominant AIDS discourse. Finally, the study will examine how the play helps eliminate the prejudice against persons with AIDS and empower the gendered Others against the stigmatization of AIDS and its metaphors through the effect of catharsis in theatre.

II. The Emergence of AIDS Epidemic: A Historical Retrospect

The brief historical retrospect deepens our understanding of AIDS crisis and helps us to recognize the underlying reality of the disease. AIDS is not just a disease, but a product of social construction. As Brandt remarks, the perceptions of AIDS are not only determined strictly by the disease’s biological character but deeply influenced by our social cultural understanding of the disease and its victims (Brandt, 1988, p.163). Hence, this part will offer a brief historical retrospect of AIDS epidemic and explain how the AIDS metaphors are raised.

AIDS was first clinically observed in 1981, when some physicians in New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco began seeing gay men with cases of *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia (PCP), a rare opportunistic infection which was known to occur in people with compromised immune systems. Shortly thereafter, Dr. Alvin Friedman-Kien of New York University Medical Center had found a cluster of gay men infected with a rare skin cancer, called Kaposi’s sarcoma (KS), which presented striking symptoms, bluish or purple-brown lesions on the skin. By June 1981, twenty-six such cases were reported by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in their

Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report.

The first media coverage of AIDS, headlined “Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals,” was made by the correspondent of *The New York Times*, Lawrence K. Altman, on July 3, 1981. Summarizing the official report and his interview with Dr. Alvin Friedman-Kien, Altman implied that the origin of the disease was the improper behavior of the homosexual men: “According to Dr. Friedman-Kien, the reporting doctors said that most cases had involved homosexual men who have had multiple and frequent sexual encounters with different partners, as many as 10 sexual encounters each night up to four times a week” (Altman, A20). The report implied that the cause of the disease was the promiscuous life style of homosexual group. Another news report, with the headline “New Homosexual Disorder Worries Health Office,” reinforced the association of the disease with homosexual group. Altman indicated that “A disorder of the immune system that has been known to doctors for less than a year—a disorder that appears to affect primarily male homosexuals—has now afflicted at least 335 people...GRID has reached epidemic proportions and the current totals probably represent ‘just the tip of the iceberg’” (Altman, 1982, C1). He cites Dr. Lawrence D. Mass’ suggestion: “gay people whose life style consists of anonymous sexual encounters are going to have to do some serious rethinking” (Altman, 1982, C1).

There was no official name for the disease in the early years of its outbreak because it was still unknown to the scientists. But the term GRID, which stood for gay-related immunodeficiency, was the very term frequently used by the general press to refer to the disease. As Sander L. Gilman points out, the term GRID makes the link between AIDS and homosexuality unbreakable:

The centrality of sexual orientation in the early picture AIDS can be further seen in the designation of the disease during the first quarter of 1982 as GRID (gay-related immunodeficiency). This label structured the understanding of AIDS in such a marked manner that PWAs were not only stigmatized as carriers of an infectious disease, but also placed within a very specific category. For AIDS (a term officially coined only in the fall of 1982) was understood as a specific subset of the larger category of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) as a disease from which homosexuals suffered as a direct result of their sexual practices and related “life-style”...(Gilman, 1988, p.89)

By July 1982, the CDC started referring to the disease as AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome), after determining that the disease was not confined to the gay community and realizing that the term GRID was misleading. As the history of AIDS

in America shows, it has long been regarded as the disease of the homosexuals, the disease of the gendered others.

The history of responses to particular diseases can inform our understanding of and response to the current health crisis. Just as the syphilis in the first decade of the twentieth century is thought to bring to the middle-class from the sexual deviants, AIDS threatens heterosexuals with homosexual contamination (Brandt, 1988, p.155). As Simon Watney points out,

...the continued homosexualization of HIV disease in the face of all the worldwide evidence concerning the diversity of social groups already affected strongly implies that the notion of HIV as a ‘gay plague’ in fact protects heterosexuals from facing up to something which they find even more frightening than AIDS — namely, the diversity of sexual desire. (Watney,1989, p.33)

Underlying the fear of AIDS infection is deeper concerns about the threat of homosexuality. In western heterosexual society, AIDS is regarded as the punishment for the homosexual promiscuity; AIDS equals gay disease; AIDS equals homosexuality. In short, the prevailing impression about AIDS in the public consciousness can be concluded as follows: AIDS=death, AIDS= promiscuity, promiscuity= homosexuality, and finally, AIDS=promiscuity=homosexuality =death.

III. The Underlying Truth of AIDS: “Who cares if a faggot dies?”

The literary realistic drama reflects the social problems of ordinary lives. Its purpose is to initiate the debates on certain social issues. In the forward of *The Normal Heart* and *The Destiny of Me*, Tony Kushner indicates that “Kramer, not understating that that theater had ceased to newsworthy, wrote a play that made news, made a difference, had an effect—not to win prizes or encomia in the press, nor to set the box office ablaze, but to catalyze his society, which we all know theater can’t do anymore, except on the rare occasions when it does, as when Larry Kramer wrote *The Normal Heart*” (Kushner, 2000, p.vii). Kushner thinks that Kramer intends “to use dramatic literature and the stage to get at truth, at a truth, at one truth of these times—and not a metaphysical truth... but rather truth as Marx understood it, truth that springs from and returns to action, truth engaged with practice, *praxis*, truth that is shaped by and shapes lived experience, truth that is changed by and changes the world” (Kushner, 2000, p. viii). Indeed, just as its title (a line taken from W. H. Auden’s famous poem, “September 1, 1939), the play is designed to “undo the folded

lie.”² Kramer’s intention of writing *The Normal Heart* is to dig out “the truth” that is buried in the AIDS epidemic.

The Normal Heart is set between July 1981 and May 1984, the outbreak of AIDS epidemic. It opens in the medical office of Dr. Emma Brookner, a polio-stricken physician, whom Ned Weeks meets for a check-up. After examining some twenty cases with symptom of purple lesions on skin, Dr. Brookner implies that a mysterious disease is ready to break out in gay community:

EMMA: Not even any good clues yet. And even if they found out tomorrow what’s happening, it takes years to find out how to cure and prevent anything. All I know is this disease is the most insidious killer I’ve ever seen or studied or heard about. And I think we’re seeing only the tip of the iceberg. And I’m afraid it’s on the rampage. I’m frightened nobody important is going to give a damn because it seems to be happening mostly to gay men. Who cares if a faggot dies? (Kramer, 1985, p.22)

Although the cause of the disease is still unknown to the physicians, gay men are targeted as “high-risk groups.” Dr. Brookner urges Ned to tell his gay friends “to stop having sex” (Kramer, 1985, p.25) because she thinks that it is “the only way this disease will stop spreading” (Kramer, 1985, p.26). While Ned thinks that the advice is “a preposterous request” for “promiscuity” is “the principal political agenda” (Kramer, 1985, p.25) of gay community, she warns against the promiscuous sex which she thinks the cause of disease: “Mr. Weeks, if having sex can kill you, doesn’t anybody with half a brain stop fucking?” (Kramer, 1985, p.26). Medical authority can change socio-cultural attitude toward certain groups. The opening scene of the play shows that the medical authority helps to link the disease with gay men’s promiscuity. Erving Goffman defines the the notion that particular groups are prone to infection of venereal disease as a kind of social stigma. (as cited in Brandt, 1988, p.156). Roenblum observes AIDS crisis and offers a similar idea: “It was science, after all, that conceptualized AIDS as a gay disease—and wasted precious time scrutinizing our sex lives...all the while taking little notice of the others who were dying of AIDS” (as cited in Crimp,1988, p.6).The prevalent epidemiological concept of high-risk groups,” which implies that some groups are more vulnerable to AIDS than others, is powerfully reinforced by the deeply misleading notion of “homosexual acts,” held to

² The title of the play is a line taken from W. H. Auden’s famous poem, “September, 1, 1939.” The stanzas that excerpt from the poem are printed along with the play. Stanza 6: The windiest militant trash/ Important Persons shout/ Is not so crude as our wish:/ What mad Nijinsky wrote/ About Diaghilev/ Is true of the normal heart;/ For the error bred in the bone/ Of each woman and each man/ Craves what it cannot have,/ Not universal love/ But to be loved alone. Stanza 8: All I have is a voice/ To undo the folded lie,/ The romantic lie in the brain/ Of the sensual man-in-the street/ And the lie of Authority/ Whose buildings grope the sky:/ There is no such thing as the State/ And no one exists alone;/ Hunger allows no choice/ To the citizens or the police; We must love one another or die.

be the primarily responsible for the transmission of the disease (Watney, 1989, p.31).

Because the disease first happens to ravage the gay community, the disease is inevitably to be regarded as a gay disease. Susan Sontag believes that “‘Plague’ is the principal metaphor by which the AIDS epidemic is understood” (Sontag, 1990, p.132). The plague metaphor associated with AIDS brings back the historical idea that illness is morally judged. Just as plagues happened centuries ago are invariably regarded as judgments on society, AIDS is inevitably to be seen as a judgment on those who transgress the moral codes. Based on the traditional concept of sexually transmitted diseases, AIDS is described “as punishments not just of individuals but of a group (‘general licentiousness’)” (Sontag, 1990, p.142). AIDS and its victims are often condemned as “the consequence of moral decadence,” as “God’s punishment,” or as “the revenge of the nature” (Sontag, 1990, p.149). The connection of AIDS, promiscuity and homosexuality results in the further stigmatization of homosexuals and PWAs.

The prejudice and discrimination against gay men in the society result in the slow action of the government and mass media to the crisis. In the first scene, Emma tells Ned that *The New England Journal of Medicine* finally published a study her hospital sent in over a year earlier, and that the *New York Times* finally ran something about the disease on some inside page, page twenty. She continues,

You have a Commissioner of Health who got burned with the Swine Flu epidemic, declaring an emergency when there wasn’t one. The government appropriated \$150 million for that mistake. You have a Mayor who’s a bachelor and I assume afraid of being perceived as too friendly to anyone gay. (Kramer, 1985, p.23)

The connection of AIDS to homosexuality delays the country’s response to the crisis. As Denny remarks, “The world, motivated by a disastrous combination of prejudice, vicious self-righteousness, murderous indifference to the fate of a group mistakenly thought to be “other,” and massive, panicked denial, ignored the problem and blindly allowed the epidemic to get out of control” (Denny, 1993, pp. 37-38).

The indifference of the government toward the crisis manifests the socio-cultural discrimination to homosexuality and PWAs. The homophobic response of the political officials to AIDS epidemic leads to a calamity in gay group. Being furious with the government that hasn’t taken any positive response to the disease, Ned founds an organization with his friends whose mission is to press the city hall to pay attention to the epidemic. Along with his colleagues, Ned attempts to arrange a meeting with New York’s mayor. Ned says that the death cases have risen up to two hundred and fifty-six and suggests the city hall to declare the emergency. Unfortunately, Ned’s suggestion is

rebuffed by the Mayor's assistant, Hiram, who thinks "that only gets people excited" (Kramer, 1985, p.72). Hiram declares that the government is aware of the figures of the death and insinuates that Ned is overreacting to the crisis: "you can't expect us to concern ourselves with every little outbreak those boys come up with" (Kramer, 1985, p.70).

Health is a political issue. Dr. Brookner emphasizes that "Everyone's entitled to good medical care" (Kramer, 1985, p.24). However, AIDS, being considered the gay plague, is overlooked by the government. Ned complains about the inadequacy of the government's action to the crisis: "Where's the god-damned AMA in all of this? The government has not started one single tube of research. Where's the board of directors of your very own hospital? You have so many patients you haven't got rooms for them..." (Kramer, 1985, p.62). Emma gradually takes Ned's part and desperately asks for government funding for further research. In Scene 12, she sits alone in spotlight on stage, facing an examining doctor who represents the government's position on her research into the new virus. The doctor refuses to support her research:

EXAMINING DOCTOR: Unfortunately the President has threatened to veto. As you know, he's gone on record as being unalterably and irrevocably opposed to anything that might be construed as an endorsement of homosexuality. Naturally this has slowed things down. (Kramer, 1985, p.88)

The prejudice against homosexuality is the major factor that the government refuses to afford any kind of research. She finally recognizes a truth—everyone is entitled to good medical care except for those marginal groups.

The nearly silence of mass media to the AIDS crisis is also one of Kramer's targets in *The Normal Heart*. At the beginning of the epidemic, there are few news reports about the disease. Ned accuses the newspapers of being equal to murders due to the lack of coverage of the AIDS crisis:

NED: Have you been following this Tylenol scare? In three months there have been seven deaths, and the *Times* has written fifty-four articles. The month of October alone they ran one article every single day. Four of them were on the front page. Four us—in seventeen months they've written seven puny inside articles. And we have a thousand cases! (Kramer, 1985, p.65)

The New York Times, one of the most influential newspapers in the U.S., has power to pressure the government to resolve the health problems. However, silence seems to be the most effective means for them to deal with gay issues.

According to Susan Sontag, AIDS is often regarded as an “alien other” as enemies in modern war, and “the move from the demonization of the illness to the attribution of fault to the patient is an inevitable one” (Sontag, 1990, p.99). She believes that this military metaphor helps shape the concept that the AIDS is the disease of the “other people.” She argues that this metaphor is a combination of two concepts, invasion and pollution. To western heterosexual society, AIDS is a threat or the pollution to the moral order and behavior standards. The concepts of invasion and pollution reflect the collective anxiety about homosexuality in the mainstream society. Hence, as long as the mainstream press sees AIDS as something that happens to “other people,” the AIDS problem will continue to be dismissed.

The way a society responds to problems of disease reflects its cultural and moral values. These values, based on patterns of judgment about what is good or bad, will guide human perception and action. As Susan Sontag points out, the sexual transmitted disease, regarded by most people as “a calamity one brings on oneself,” is judged more harshly, especially when “AIDS is understood as a disease not only of sexual excess but of perversity” (Sontag, 1990, p.114). Since the cause of AIDS is understood to be the result of “indulgence” and “perversity” of gay community, the connection of AIDS with punishment to certain group is easily made. In *The Normal Heart*, Larry Kramer utilizes the character, Ben, to represent the negative perceptions of homosexuality in mainstream society. Ned’s brother, a homophobic attorney, is occupied with mass media’s misrepresentation of gay men. He shows Ned a copy of *Newsweek*, with a “Gay America” on the cover. The article inside features pictures of men in leather and chains with whips and black masks. Those pictures strengthen his prejudice against gay men. When Ned asks for his brother’s help, Ben seems to be more interested in buying a two-million-dollars house than offering any financial support to Ned’s gay organization. Ned sarcastically asks if Ben would be more interested if AIDS is a “straight disease” (Kramer, 1985, p.50). Ben is unwilling to support Ned’s organization; he thinks that gay men should take responsibilities for their moral transgression: “...you go to the bathhouses and fuck blindly....You guys don’t seem to understand why there are rules, and regulations, guidelines, responsibilities” (Kramer, 1985, p.52). Ben’s ignorance to the AIDS issue reflects the prevailing homophobia in the mainstream society.

IV. AIDS Trauma: Gay Fear and Gay Shame

In a society with heteronormative values, heterosexuality is normal while homosexuality is abnormal. Gay men have long been constructed by the dominant institutions as the abnormal, deviant, perverted “other.” AIDS, with its punitive

metaphors, reinforces people's prejudice against gay group. *The Normal Heart* shows how AIDS and its metaphors torture the PWAs and the gay people. Homosexual desire, practices and lives, linked to AIDS, add greatly to the suffering of the PWAs. The emergence of AIDS makes a tremendous impact on gay men. It triggers gay men's traumatic past that homosexuality has been labeled as a psychic ill and homosexuals have been tracked down by the government in the name of anti-communism. Apart from his political intent, Kramer also dramatizes fear, shame and grief of gay men who struggles against AIDS and its social stigma in *The Normal Heart*. By staging the emotions of fear and shame of gay men, Kramer retells the psychological trauma that he and most urban gay men of Stonewall generation have ever experienced.

Fear and shame are common responses to the threat of AIDS. During the first years of the AIDS epidemic, the prevalent emotion culture animates feeling of shame linked to fear. As Gould indicates, AIDS crisis evokes "shame about gay sexual practices" and "the 'irresponsible' gay past, as well as a corollary fear of ongoing social rejection of gays failed to act in a respectable manner" (Gould, 2009, p. 236). The first line of the play—"I know something's wrong" (Kramer, 1985, p.19) —reflects the ambivalent emotions of most gay men. They know that their sexual practices might be the cause of AIDS spreading. They are afraid of AIDS, of death and also of social rejection. They also feel ashamed of their irresponsible past even though most of them are unwilling to articulate that.

The opening scene of *The Normal Heart* poses a question that most PWAs might ask: "Will you still love me when I am doomed and covered with lesions?" In the office of Dr. Brookner, Ned accompanies with his friends Mickey and Craig for a check-up. While they are in the waiting room, they see a man coming out the office with "*highly visible purple lesions on his face*" (Kramer, 1985, p.20). He says he is Dr. Brookner's twenty-eighth case and sixteen of them are dead. The marks of lesions are frightened; Ned and Mickey worry if they are the next case. When Craig learns that he might be infected with AIDS, he is scared and keeps asking where his gay lover is. He rushes out of the hospital. At the moment he meets his lover, he collapses and dies. The major impact of AIDS on gay people is the fear of being abandoned. The lesions on gay men's bodies often frighten their partners away. Sontag indicates that the most terrifying illnesses are those perceived not just as lethal but as dehumanizing. Illness that damages or deforms the face often arouses the deepest dread. The lesions on the face of the PWAs are the signs of decomposition, the marks of moral degradation (Sontag, 1990, pp.127-9).

In the early years of AIDS epidemic, the first reaction of most gay men to AIDS is disbelief. They tend to reject the possibility that AIDS is a new contagious disease.

They can't believe that a disease picks out just gays and the only way to prevent it is "self-control" (Treichler, 1988, p.47). In *The Normal Heart*, when Ned warns his gay friends that the new disease is sexually contagious, and the only way to prevent it is to stop having sex, they refuse to follow Ned's advice because they think they have just achieved sexual freedom. While Ned advocates stopping the promiscuous way of life, Mickey is strongly opposed to Ned's suggestion for "sexuality" is what gay men used to define themselves. Bruce Niles, the president of Ned's organization, also thinks that Ned is overreacting to the disease. Since the virus hasn't discovered yet and its origin is not certain, they have no right to interfere gay men's lives.

The denial of AIDS is due to their fear of exposing their sexual orientation in public. Most of Ned's colleagues in the organization advocate a more moderate way instead of Ned's offensive tactic because they are afraid that their identity will be revealed. Bruce Niles thinks if he openly engages anything about AIDS, he is in danger of losing his job because his boss "hates gay" and keeps telling "fag jokes" (Kramer, 1985, p.48). He refuses to go on TV to agitate for gay men's right because he is afraid of "being earmarked gay" (Kramer, 1985, p.65). AIDS has been labeled as a "gay disease," a punishment to the pervert others. Hence, the PWAs and gay men can't be free from the fear of social rejection. As Sontag points out,

To get AIDS is precisely to be revealed, in the majority of cases so far, as a member of a certain "risk group," a community of pariahs. The illness flushes out an identity that might have remained hidden from neighbors, jobmates, family, friends. It also confirms an identity and, among the risk group in the United States most severely affected in the beginning, homosexual men, has been a creator of community as well as an experience that isolates the ill and exposes them to harassment and persecution. (Sontag, 1990, pp.112-3)

AIDS sufferers not only have to face the threat of death, but also have to deal with a series of social perceptions and attitudes that encourage further discrimination and isolation.

AIDS reminds most gay men of their old bad days, the time when homosexuality is labeled as a mental disorder and homosexuals are persecuted by the government under the name of patriotism. Before the Stonewall riot, homosexuality has long been listed by APA as a sociopathic personality disturbance. Around 1960s, Wisconsin Senator Joseph R. McCarthy took anti-communism as a tool to suppress the political foes and conducted hearings searching for communists. Homosexuals who were suspected of engaging in the act of communism became another domestic enemy. They were tracked by FBI and the police, arrested and exposed on the newspaper. *The*

Normal Heart mirrors the inner fear and anger of gay men about heterosexist oppression. Kramer dramatizes the physical and psychological impact of AIDS on PWAs and gay community. In Scene 11, Mickey Marcus, a government employee, is threatened by his boss, the Commissioner of the city, if he is still engaged in gay activism. He thinks AIDS as a political conspiracy that targets at gay community. He says that a mystical project, code-named Firm Hand, has started testing in 1978 on a group of gays. He cites a news report from *The Native* which says that “the Defense Department experiments at Fort Detrick, Maryland, that have produced a virus that can destroy the immune system” (Kramer, 1985, p.84). The return of the repressed fear compounds his panic: “They are going to persecute us! Cancel our health insurance. Test our blood to see if we’re pure. Lock us up. Stone us in the streets” (Kramer, 1985, p. 84).

AIDS crisis forces the gay group back to social context of homophobia. It returns them to a place where they are confined by the straight world for years, a place called “closet.” For most gay men of Stonewall generation, “gay pride” is a positive stance that inspires them to promote their dignity, self-affirmation, equality rights, increases their visibility and celebrates sexual diversity. Pride, as opposed to shame and social stigma, empowers them to fight against discrimination and violence. What they have fought for years is the social acceptance of gender variance and the sexual liberation. However, in the subsequent era of AIDS, the sexual liberation turns out to be the murderer. It is regarded as the cause of AIDS epidemic. Kramer dramatizes the depression of most gay men when they are told that gay sex is the cause of AIDS:

MICKEY: I’ve spent fifteen years of my life fighting for our right to be free and make love whenever, wherever...And you’re telling me that all those years of what being gay stood for is wrong... and I’m a murderer. We have been so oppressed! Don’t you remember how it was? Can’t you see how important it is for us to love openly, without hiding and without guilt? We were punch of funny-looking fellows who grew up in sheer misery and one day we fell into the orgy rooms and we thought we’d found heaven. And we would teach the world how wonderful heaven can be. We would lead the way. We would be good for something new. (Kramer, 1985, p.84)

Mickey and Bruce are angry with Ned who associates their sexuality with AIDS and proposes that abstention is the only way to prevent the disease when no one knows for sure the cause of the disease. They decide to remove Ned from the board of the organization. Bruce says: “after years of liberation, you have helped make sex dirty again for us—terrible and forbidden” (Kramer, 1985, p.94).

Pride is dependent on shame; pride is predicated on the denial of its shame. Deborah Gould argues that the repeated expressions of gay pride are supposed to have unmade gay shame (Gould, 2001, p 139). Sexual liberation is the major achievement of gay pride parade. But sexual liberation doesn't mean promiscuity. Kramer thinks that gay men should recognize that promiscuity might be cause of AIDS spreading. Gay men should confront their past positively. They need to take responsible for their shameful past so that they can overcome the fear of AIDS. In *The Normal Heart*, Kramer proposes what gay culture and gay pride should be:

NED: ...The only way we'll have real pride is when we demand recognition of a culture that isn't just sexual. It's all there—all through history we've been there; but we have to claim it, and identify who was in it, and articulate what's in our minds and hearts and all our creative contribution to this earth. And until we do that, and until we organize ourselves block by neighborhood by city by state into a united visible community that fights back, we're doomed.... Why couldn't you and I, Bruce Niles and Ned Weeks, have been leaders in creating a new definition of what it means to be gay? (Kramer, 1985, p.95)

Gould argues that the discourse of gay responsibility helps to restore a sense of dignity to the gay community. She remarks: "these articulations of pride encompassed more than just the feeling of pride: they conveyed an unspoken but palpable sense of relief that gays could now be construed by others as virtually normal; they indicated a widespread hope that that appearance of normalcy would erase or override gay difference and thereby invite social acceptance" (Gould, 2009, p.236). Kramer thinks that gay pride is not used to demonstrate gay difference. What gay men should fight for is a "normal life" and a "normal heart."

V. Cathartic Power of Theater: Same Sex Love

Don Shewey remarks that the main goal of AIDS theater is "to make AIDS more ordinary, to make people understand that it's not a moral affliction, it's another disease" (Shewey, 1987, A5). The didactic intent of *The Normal Heart* is to disclose the metaphors surrounding AIDS and enlighten the audience on the truth about AIDS. By utilizing the conventions of realistic theater, the most accepted theatrical mode by the mainstream audience, Kramer succeeds in drawing the public attention and initiating positive discussion about AIDS. Beyond its didactic goal, the play also achieves the cathartic function of theater. Aristotle thinks that tragedy can arouse the pity and fear in the audience and in turn results in a cleansing emotion or healing for

the audience. Tragedy can relieve the audience of the harmful emotions as they observe the suffering of the characters on stage. If Aristotle's theory is still true in modern theater, the representation of human suffering will not make people depressed. Rather, it will generate a healing power for the audience. William Hoffman explains more clearly about the cathartic power of modern theater: "People are using the play to express publicly their grief. With AIDS, grief is often in the closet. People don't want others to know they have AIDS or a friend has AIDS. But they can go to a play and learn that other people feel exactly the same way. I think it's important for people to know that feeling terrible is a normal response to sadness" (as cited in Shewey, 1987, A5).

The Normal Heart successfully induces the pathos in the audience. Since it opened in 1985 at the Public Theater, *The Normal Heart* has received a great number of positive reviews. Randy Shilts describes the reception of the play: "A thunderous ovation echoed through the theater...NBC said it "beats with passion"; *Time* magazine said it was "deeply affecting, tense and touching"...*New York Magazine's* critic John Simon, who had recently been overheard saying that he looked forward to when AIDS had killed all the homosexuals in New York theater, concede in an interview that he left the play weeping" (Shilts, 1988, p.556). Jack Kroll wrote for *Newsweek* that "Kramer produces not a series of debates but a cross fire of life-and-death energies that illuminate the many issues and create a fierce and moving human drama. It is bracing and exciting to hear so much passionate and intelligent noise on a stage again (as cited in Juntunen, p.43). In *Time Magazine*, the reviewer comments that "*The Normal Heart* so deeply affecting is that it portrays anguish and doom in individual of every sexual inclination to grasp a common bond of suffering and mortality" (as cited in Juntunen, 43). Ellis thinks that *The Normal Heart* is "somehow able to transcend its political location by inducing an emotional overload in its audience" (Ellis & Heritage, 1989, p.45). She describes the reception of the play in London: "The tears of both audience and critics soaked all the review as each of the reviewers tried to convey just how she was moved, upset, enlightened or 'knocked out' by this 'white hot blast' of a play" (Ellis & Heritage, 1989, p.41). More recently, Brantley reviews the revival production of the play in 2011 and remarks: "your eyes are pretty much guaranteed to start stinging before the first act is over, and by the play's end even people who think they have no patience for polemical theater may find their resistance has melted into tears" (Brantley, 2011, C1).

How can *The Normal Heart* move the dominant media so deeply while they remain unmoved to the growing death count of gay men for years? How can the play release the pressure on the infected and their loved ones? How can the play empower the sufferers to dispel the fear of death? Joseph Papp, the director of the 1985's

production of *The Normal Heart*, offers his opinion:

Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* is a play in the great tradition of Western Drama. In taking a burning social issue and holding it up to public and private scrutiny so that it reverberates with the social and personal implications of that issue, *The Normal Heart* reveals its origins in the theater of Sophocles, Euripides and Shakespeare...Yet, at the heart of *The Normal Heart*, the element that gives this powerful political play its essence, is love—love holding firm under fire, put to the ultimate test, facing and overcoming our greatest fear: death. (Papp, 1985, p.17)

Indeed, *The Normal Heart* proves that the theater possesses a healing power that can empower the sufferers to overcome the fear of death.

The later part of *The Normal Heart* shows great intensity of same sex love. In Scene 11, Bruce Niles comes on performing a monologue, addressing the audience the last hours of his latest lover, Albert. Bruce takes him on an airplane trip back to his hometown, Phoenix, before he dies. Due to AIDS, Albert loses his mind and suffers from severe incontinence. Bruce starts mopping him up as best as he can while all the other people are staring at them and moving away in droves. Bruce says,

I sit there holding his hand, say, "Albert, please, nor more, hold it in, man, I beg you, just for us, for Bruce and Albert." ...And when we go to Phoenix...and by the time we got to the hospital where his mother had fixed up his room real nice, Albert was dead. (Kramer, 1985, p.87)

Albert dies gruesomely. Bruce addresses the audience how Albert is ill-treated after he dies:

The doctor refused to examine him to put a cause of death on the death certificate, and without a death certificate the undertakers wouldn't take him away, and neither would the police. Finally, some orderly comes in and stuffs Albert in a heavy-duty Glad Bag and motions us with his finger to follow and he puts him out in the back alley with the garbage. (Kramer, 1985, p.87)

The scene that Albert dies of AIDS saddens the audience. The following scene that Ned nurses his dying lover Felix heightens the dramatic tension of the play. When Ned finds Felix eating junk food, and when he learns that Felix is ready to give up his own life, he rages against Felix:

Felix, I am so sick of statistics, and numbers, and body counts, and how-manys, and Emma; You can't eat the food. Take your poison. I don't

care... (*Item by item, he throws the food on the floor.*) No green salad. No broccoli; we don't want any of that, nor, sir. No bread with seven grains. Who would ever want any milk? You might get some calcium in your bones. (*The carton of milk explodes when it hits the floor.*) You want to die, Felix? Die! (*NED retreats to a far corner. After a moment, FELIX crawls through the milk, takes an item of food, which he pulls along with his hand, and with extreme effort makes his way across to NED. They fall into each other's arms.*) Felix, please don't leave me. (Kramer, 1985, p.98)

The mood of the scene moves from the utter frustration that his partner will give up his life to the fear that his partner is going to die. After Ned slams the milk on the floor, he falls to the floor and shouts at Felix, "Die!" With extreme effort, Felix crawls across the milk to Ned. The scene ends with their holding each other. Many of the reviews on *The Normal Heart* say that the scene is indescribably moving. John Simon, writing for New York, says that "we can chock back our sobs over a gallant death, but cry rightly over a carton of spilt milk" (as cited in Juntunen, 47). In this scene, the audience shares Ned's frustration. It is at the moment of frustration that the play wins the sympathy for the sufferers of AIDS and their lovers.

The Normal Heart ends with a deathbed marriage ceremony between Ned and Felix. Felix, on his deathbed, asks Ned to learn "to fight again" (Kramer, 1985, p.101), and Ned informs Felix that he has already begun his activism by attempting to attend a meeting of gay leaders at the Bishop's to which he is not invited in. Felix's death reminds that activism is the only way that gay men can save themselves. The ending scene shows a bright future for gay activism:

NED: ...Felix, when they invited me to Gay Week at Yale, they had a dance... In my old college dining hall, just across the campus from that tiny freshman room where I wanted to kill myself because I thought I was the only gay man in the world—they had a dance. Felix, there were six hundred young men and women there. Smart, exceptional young men and women. Thank you, Felix. (Kramer, 1985, p.103)

Ned knows that he won't be lonely anymore. The men and women in college represent the next generation of political activists. These "exceptional" men and women will keep on struggling for equality between gay and straight and between illness and health. The ending scene of the play shows that the fight against AIDS is far from ended.

VI. Conclusion

Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* helps disseminate the necessary information

about AIDS and remove the metaphors of AIDS that have created enormous physical and psychological hardships for PWAs and gay men. The play discloses how and why PWAs and gay groups have been stigmatized and demonized by medical reports, mass media, and governmental institutions in the early years of AIDS epidemic. As David Roman indicates, the play is designed to “castigate the various structures of power contributing to the AIDS crisis” (Roman, 1992, p.61). In addition, the play induces the pathos in the audience and in turn results in cathartic effect. As Kramer mentioned, his purpose of writing *The Normal Heart* is to “make people cry.” He wants his audience to see how gay men struggle against the illness and how depressed they are when they are doomed to death. In short, Kramer’s choice to use realistic theater as the medium successfully achieves its didactic and affective goal—to educate the audience about AIDS and to accuse the government, the media and the medical institutions of their indifference or even inaction to the AIDS crisis.

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反抗愛滋及其隱喻：賴瑞·克雷默《正常心》中 同志恐懼與重獲力量

張素蓁*

摘要

賴瑞·克雷默(Larry Kramer)之東尼獎得獎作品《正常心》(The Normal Heart)，以愛滋病爆發時期作為戲劇背景，描寫美國紐約同志社群，在社會偏見及政府漠視下，所發出的憤怒與控訴。透過舞台劇方式，呈現同志社群的痛苦掙扎，同時揭發愛滋病患如何長期遭受媒體、醫療及政府組織的汙名化與罪犯化，藉以喚起大眾對該疾病的注意，並為同志族群爭取權益。蘇珊·桑塔格(Susan Sontag)曾指出，愛滋病不僅是一種疾病，也隱含著具有懲罰意味的隱喻。她認為各種與愛滋病有關的隱喻汙名化 HIV 感染者，也因此阻礙了他們尋求適當的醫療照顧，唯有在愛滋隱喻完全破除後，病患才有勇氣對抗疾病。本文即以桑塔格的論述為基礎，檢視本劇如何挑戰愛滋病的主流論述，為愛滋病除汙名化，並論證本劇的情感淨化功能，給予性別他者對抗愛滋汙名及其隱喻的勇氣。

關鍵字：賴瑞·克雷默、《正常心》、愛滋病、同志恐懼、戲劇中的情感淨化

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