Words That Wound: Lgbtq Playwrights Respond to Bullying and Teen Suicide

Kevin Christopher Crowe
University of Colorado at Boulder, kevin.crowe@colorado.edu

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WORDS THAT WOUND: LGBTQ PLAYWRIGHTS RESPOND

TO BULLYING AND TEEN SUICIDE

By

KEVIN CHRISTOPHER CROWE

B.A., Stony Brook University, 1998
M.F.A., Humboldt State University, 2003
M.S., Portland State University, 2010

A thesis submitted to the
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This thesis entitled:
Words That Wound: LGBTQ Playwrights Respond to Bullying and Teen Suicide
Written by Kevin Cristopher Crowe
has been approved for the Department of Theatre & Dance

__________________________________________
Dr. Beth Osnes (Committee Chair)

__________________________________________
Dr. Bud Coleman

__________________________________________
Dr. Amanda Giguere

__________________________________________
Dr. Lynn Nichols

__________________________________________
Dr. Cecilia Pang

Date: __________________

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the forms meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above-mentioned discipline.
Abstract

Kevin Cristopher Crowe (Ph.D.; Theatre)
Words That Wound: LGBTQ Playwrights Respond to Bullying and Teen Suicide
Thesis directed by Associate Professor Beth Osnes

This research looks at how playwrights within a specific and unique community use theatre to address challenges faced by that community to bring about positive change. Specifically, this investigation focuses on the American LGBTQ community, who have historically demonstrated a high level of success in using theatre to bring public awareness to specific issues, such as homophobia and AIDS, and how playwrights within that community are currently dealing with the ongoing crisis of teen suicide and bullying, particularly in light of a string of LGBTQ bullying-related suicides in September 2010. It asks the questions: is bullying becoming a common theme in the post-AIDS era of gay theatre-making? What approaches and techniques are being used by these playwrights in their attempt to affect change? And finally, do these approaches reflect knowledge gained from the work of previous gay and lesbian playwrights in the Identity plays and the AIDS plays?

Three core chapters will analyze and contextualize the approaches taken in six plays that focus on the physical, verbal, and psychological intimidation of children and adolescents written by LGBTQ-identified American playwrights in the period of 2010 - 2015. The approaches will then be examined in relation to current national initiatives being taken to reduce peer-victimization and violence in schools. Interviews with four of the playwrights will add insight into the personal, political, or social motivation for writing the work and the intended outcome.
For the all young ones who will never grow old,

Who ended their tale when the world grew too cold.
Acknowledgements

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Chapter One

Historical Context, Theoretical Framework, and Literature Review

A recent study by the Human Rights Watch indicated that LGBTQ youth are three times as likely as their heterosexual peers to have been assaulted or involved in at least one physical fight in school, are three times as likely to have been threatened or injured with a weapon at school, and are nearly four times as likely to have skipped school because they felt unsafe (qtd. in Swearer et al. 161). While bullying behavior tends to decrease as children progress through school, this disparity does not (Seaman). Pilkington and D’Augelli (1995) surveyed 350 lesbian, gay, or bisexual youths aged 21 and younger about their experiences of direct victimization, as well as knowledge of other LGBTQ youths' victimization during high school. Over half reported verbal abuse in high school because of their sexual orientation, and 11% said they had been physically assaulted. Youths who were more open in high school about their sexual orientation and who had a history of more gender atypical behavior were victimized more often (Pilkington and D’Augelli 34). Studies indicate that victims of bullying experience long-term adverse consequences on their physical and mental health, and that these health risks increase in direct proportion to the number of bullying incidents they experience (Bakalar; Copeland, Wolke, Lereya, et al.). In addition, a study conducted by Russell and Joyner, published in American Journal of Public Health, concluded that:

There is a strong link between adolescent sexual orientation and suicidal thoughts and behaviors. The strong effect of sexual orientation on suicidal thoughts is mediated by critical youth suicide risk factors, including depression, hopelessness, alcohol abuse, recent suicide attempts by a peer or a family member, and experiences of victimization. (Russell and Joyner)
This is a dilemma for the LGBTQ community. LGBTQ youth are being bullied, and as a result their physical and mental health is being affected, they are dropping out of school, and they are demonstrating increased rates of suicidality. In recent years, national attention has been brought to the issue, in part due to specific tragedies that have impacted the national consciousness. Federal initiatives have been taken to provide resources to youth, schools, and parents to help establish guidelines to reduce peer victimization. The LGBTQ community has responded with campaigns of their own to target youth through social media, personal video commentary, books, and nationwide conferences.

But a vital and dynamic relationship already exists that has provided the gay community with a powerful voice that has historically demonstrated its effectiveness in addressing the dilemmas it has encountered throughout the twentieth century. For many decades, it was the only voice available for the struggling lesbian and gay movement: the American stage. As acclaimed gay playwright Lanford Wilson said in 1988, “Theatre is really the only public forum a gay writer has” (qtd. in McNulty and Phillip). While much has changed since Wilson’s remark, and LGBTQ Americans are more integrated in the larger national culture, including its media, than ever before, the LGBTQ community still maintains a unique relationship with the American stage. It remains a primary voice. A voice that defied censors and brought the struggle for gay identity into the public forum in the 1960s and 70s, and a voice that cried out for help when an insidious epidemic began annihilating its own in the 1980s and 90s.

Theatre-making has proven effective for the gay community in addressing the oppression and alienation it has faced. The question, then, is how is this new generation of American lesbian and gay playwrights responding to the epidemic of bullying and teen suicide,
if they are responding at all? What approaches are they using to draw attention to the plight of LGBTQ youth and inspire change? Playwrights seek to create work that stimulates the thoughts and emotions of the audience to provoke reaction. But what is the most effective way to change something that is as iconic in modern culture as the bully-victim encounter? Luckily, LGBTQ playwrights can look to their own history for guidance. These playwrights have before them an astonishing body of work created by their forerunners that has effectively used the stage to bring about what is nothing less than, by all accounts, extraordinary change (Harris 3).

**Historical Context: A Demonstrable Moment**

On April 21, 1985, Mayor Edward Koch called an emergency press conference to announce a drastic change in New York City’s policies regarding AIDS, a disease that had been primarily affecting the city’s homosexual male population since at least the early 1980s and whose etiology was still uncertain. This change in policy was accompanied by the allotment of $6 million in city funding – six times what had previously been budgeted - toward programs dealing with the treatment of the disease, including health care facilities, patient care teams, and hospices for people with AIDS (Shilts 556). This announcement was sudden and unexpected, coming from a mayor who for years had refused to answer questions about the growing AIDS epidemic or develop specific citywide policies in dealing with the disease despite the pleas of a multitude of medical professionals and gay rights organizations, including the recently formed Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC). Epidemiologists had long declared New York City an epicenter for the disease with the number of cases surpassing 3,000, yet the city was still lacking any fundamental approach to dealing with its spread. Complaints about the Koch administration’s inaction had fallen on deaf ears for years (Shilts 533). What was the motivation
for this hurried press conference? Even the assembled reporters could not have guessed the reason for this sudden and very public announcement.

Just hours earlier, photocopied scripts of a new play, entitled The Normal Heart, were circulated among the city’s news organizations. The play, which was set to open that evening at the Public Theater, was written by outspoken AIDS activist Larry Kramer, one of the original founders of GMHC and the author of a now infamous New York Native article that condemned the mayor for continuing to ignore the disease. The title of the piece, “1,112 and Counting,” was a reference to the number of people who had been infected by disease at the time it was published. It denounced both The New York Times for its lack of coverage of the disease and Mayor Koch for his failure to develop any concrete response or citywide initiatives to support hospitals, caretakers, those already infected, and perhaps most importantly, research and education on how to prevent the disease from spreading. Kramer wrote of Koch:

I sometimes think he doesn’t know what’s going on. I sometimes think that, like some king who has been so long on his throne, he’s lost touch with his people. Koch is so protected and isolated from his staff that he is unaware of what fear and pain we’re in. No human being could otherwise continue to be so useless to his suffering constituents. [Emphasis in the original] (Kramer, Reports from the Holocaust: The Story of an AIDS Activist 41)

Given Kramer’s previous public critiques of the mayor, Koch’s administration was understandably wary when the activist joined forces with producer Joseph Papp, another harsh critic of the mayor, to mount the production at The Public, which Papp had founded back in 1954. The mayor rushed to put together a series of public actions and a significantly increased budget that would support the city’s new plans to address the crisis. Supporters of Koch had
also spread the word that Papp was only producing the show to settle an old grudge he had with the mayor and that the play would certainly not place the mayor in a positive light. Their concern turned out to be quite justified as the play was a scathing indictment of Koch’s ineptitude and his administration’s official indifference (Shilts 531).

But in many ways, the text of the play had succeeded in its endeavor even before the curtain rose on opening night. It had forced Mayor Koch’s administration to focus attention on the epidemic and speed up its response. Larry Kramer’s *The Normal Heart* remains one of the strongest examples of a work of American political theatre that successfully provoked positive change and would help set in motion a series of events that would transform New York City’s deficient reaction to AIDS into an effective model that addressed the personal, medical and educational aspects of the disease.

*The Normal Heart* was not the first play to deal with the emerging AIDS epidemic, although political and cultural reaction to the work was more immediate than for previous theatrical productions. As an openly gay man living in New York City, Larry Kramer was part of a community that had discovered the effectiveness of theatrical production to unite the oppressed and ignite political change. But this discovery did not happen overnight and this cohesive relationship between New York’s theatrical community and its gay and lesbian community was dependent on myriad factors falling into place over the course of the previous fifty years.

Although homosexual characters can be identified in American drama since its beginnings, before the mid-twentieth century these portrayals were rarely open, often relied on stereotypes, and didn’t address the cultural issues facing the gay community (Fisher,
“Introduction” 2). Beginning in the late 1950s, American gay men and lesbians living in cities, particularly New York, began to develop small communities that used theatre as a means of personal expression and political activism. Primarily due to the skill of the individual playwrights who were creating, growing, and sharing within those communities, by the late 1960s the movement had grown in significance. Works originally produced or inspired by these communities were finding their way to off-Broadway and, eventually, Broadway stages. Over the next fifty years, theatrical works by gay and lesbian playwrights on the mainstream American stage became a significant and unprecedented force of influence in the acceptance of gays nationwide and the advancement of LGBTQ rights. Having previously only been a secondary realm of social commentary, the American stage was now being used as a primary tool for unification and as a platform in the call for social tolerance and acceptance. While many groups have successfully used the American stage to address social, political and personal issues, arguably none has yet achieved the level of accomplishment in using theatre as a primary voice than the gay community in so short a period. As James Fisher points out in his introduction to a collection of essays entitled, “We Will Be Citizens”: New Essays on Gay and Lesbian Theatre (2008):

Many reasons may be identified for this evolution of American attitudes; central among them is the unprecedented rise of gay and lesbian theatre and drama since the late 1960s. In this, the mainstream American stage – usually dismissive of overtly politicized drama – has succeeded in framing the discussion of gay rights and, in the process, has progressed the debate on homosexuals in American life. (Fisher, “Introduction” 1)
The national attention brought to the abolitionist movement by the various stage adaptations of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), or the call for unionization proclaimed in Clifford Odets’ *Waiting for Lefty* (1935), had demonstrated the effectiveness of the American stage in drawing attention to the country’s vital issues. But these issues had already been on the forefront of the American consciousness prior to the first rehearsals for these productions. Before the late 1950s, little attention was paid by the general population to the struggles of homosexual men and women who were often labeled psychologically deviant and a threat to children and the American way of life (Dunn 103–106). Unlike slavery or unionization, the plight of the homosexual was not only irrelevant to the average American, but was a topic that was disdained and therefore rarely the subject of newspapers, television, or film. What coverage was given to gay and lesbian lives by these media sources was almost always negative, which precluded the use of these media by early homosexual activists. Theatre-making was one of the few creative activities available that might help draw awareness to the oppression and intolerance faced daily by gay men and women while at the same time helping to unite the community through shared experiences and storytelling.

Since the varying techniques used by these playwrights have been generally successful in erasing intolerance and encouraging understanding through theatrical expression, a comparison of these techniques would be beneficial. Before examining the approaches used by a particular group, in this case American playwrights who have self-identified as members of the LGBTQ community, to address a specific social, political or educational dilemma in the hopes of bringing about positive change, it would be beneficial to first look at the ways in which
members of this community have succeeded in the past, and in doing so, explore how the American stage became such an instrumental voice for that community.

**Historical Context: Before 1934 - “In the Closet”**

The relationship between the American theatre and the gay and lesbian subculture was a tumultuous one throughout the first half of the twentieth century, but eventually developed into an association of ardent symbiosis. Prior to 1934, few playwrights revealed their homosexuality in public and even fewer created openly gay characters. Themes of specific importance to the homosexual community were almost nonexistant. The closest gays and lesbians came to any sort of representation on the American stage consisted primarily of the gay equivalent of minstrel characters or clownish buffoons often portrayed as fussy bachelors, butch old maids, or cowardly soldiers. These characters were usually insignificant and often used merely for laughs, including those that came from a heightened use of camp or lisping. American audiences, particularly in the 1920s, often understood the sexual innuendo behind the characters even if it was only hinted at as, indeed, it had to have been, due to censorship regulations that restricted public performance across the country (Chauncey 356–358). For example, in 1926, Edward Bourdet’s *The Captive*, about a young woman who falls into a “twisted” relationship with another woman, caused a great scandal after its Broadway opening and was ultimately banned (Shewey, “Introduction” xii). In New York, any depiction of overtly homosexual characters was outlawed by the Wales-Padlock act that penalized, “depicting or dealing with the subject of sex degeneracy or sex perversion” (Eskridge 47–48). This act came about through public outrage regarding a few particular plays, including three plays written by, of all people, Mae West, all under her real name, Jane Mast (Watts 4–9). Her plays – *Sex* (1926),
which had a subplot concerning a male prostitute, and *The Pleasure Man* (1928), a backstage comedy featuring campy gay men as secondary characters – spurred protests outside of the theatre despite sold out houses inside. West wrote *The Drag* in 1927, which centered on the son of a conservative judge who is revealed to be homosexual. The play used the pansy acts, often seen in nightclubs and burlesque shows of the time, as a backdrop. *The Drag* premiered in Bayonne, New Jersey, and West intended to tour the play around the country in a well-intentioned but ill-fated attempt to teach tolerance. However, the police were eager to stop the production from opening on Broadway and were able to close it down before it ever left Bayonne (Clum, *Still Acting Gay* 74–77).

**Historical Context: 1934 – 1962 - “Revelation Equals Death”**

In the mid-1930s, openly gay characters and themes began to be represented on the American stage for the first time. Gay playwrights usually created these characters. Yet despite this fact, a general pattern can be observed regarding the revelation of homosexuality: if a character was revealed to be homosexual, often that character’s demise would occur at some point during the story. The death of the homosexual character might come about through a freak accident, through murder, or most often, through suicide.

From a sociological point of view this trend makes sense, especially during the 1950s, which was a time when the ideal American lifestyle was illustrated through the almost artificially perfect worlds presented in such television programs as *Father Knows Best* and *Ozzy and Harriet*. These portrayals of the perfect middle-class American family set standards for living that most Americans strived to achieve yet few could attain. Any deviation from the white Christian nuclear suburban family was considered just that: deviant. This era in American
history was one of the most repressive for much of the population. African-Americans and other racial minorities were facing the daily challenges of living in separate, less supported subcultures, while the mainstream white culture seemed to be thriving. Individual expression was viewed as a threat and individual thought was subversive. This is most clearly illustrated in the McCarthy hearings and the actions of the House Un-American Activities Committee. Censorship was commonplace and the separation between church and state was weakening. Homosexuals were considered the lowest form of deviants; aversion therapy and shock treatments were often prescribed as a cure (Scot). The death of the homosexual onstage might have been considered a metaphoric victory for the American dream.

One of the earliest plays in this category was Lillian Hellman’s *The Children’s Hour* (1934), which was based on an actual event that occurred at an all-girls school in Scotland. At the end of the play, after a scandal involving accusations of lesbianism seems to have been cleared up, the character of Martha reveals to her friend, Karen, that she has feelings for her beyond that of a normal friendship. “I have loved you the way they said,“ Martha tells Karen, “There has always been something wrong. Always – as long as I can remember. But I never knew it until all this happened.” Martha then exits the room and a few moments later a shot rings out. She is dead (Watt and Richardson 448–450).

In some instances, the homosexual character need not even appear on stage yet, nonetheless, still falls victim to suicide, as is the case in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. When the play opened in 1947, it established Tennessee Williams as one of America’s greatest playwrights. Williams barely hid his homosexuality offstage but, like so many other playwrights during this period, he was careful not to shake the status quo when it came to presenting
openly gay characters onstage, which was still a crime. Yet Williams subversively makes the unseen character in *Streetcar* a persistent presence in the play, and the plot’s inciting incident revolves around him. In Blanche’s speech to Mitch, considered one of the most famous monologues in the American theatrical canon, she describes her troubling relationship with her young, newly-wed husband, Allan, and the torment he was experiencing:

> There was something different about the boy, a nervousness, a softness and tenderness which wasn’t like a man’s, although he wasn’t the least bit effeminate looking – still – that thing was there .... he came to me for help, I didn’t know that ... I didn’t know anything except that I loved him unendurably but without being able to help him or myself. (T. Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire* 114)

Although only talked about onstage, Allan’s struggle depicts the quintessential gay experience of the 1950s. The monologue continues with Blanche’s description of walking in on her young husband in bed with an older man, and later, on a dance floor, whispering in his ear, “I know. I saw. You disgust me,” at which point Allan runs off and shoots himself at the edge of a lake. Blanche is haunted by this event throughout the play. She tells her brutish brother-in-law, Stanley, “I hurt him the way you want to hurt me.” She regrets the words she spoke to Allan on the dance floor and that regret leads to her downfall. Later in the play, she states that “Deliberate cruelty is not forgivable. It is the one unforgivable thing in my opinion and it is the one thing of which I have never, never been guilty” (T. Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire* 157). Yet she has been deliberately cruel to Allan, and now she can no longer tolerate herself. As she reflects upon the incident it is clear she has been affected by it. Allan’s suicide has changed her. When her sister, Stella, refers to Allan, the man Blanche married, as a degenerate, Stella
expresses the moral view of the audience, a view once held by Blanche but no longer. In Aristotelian terms, because Blanche no longer holds the views of the society in which she lives, she falls from it. In this case, it is a fall from sanity.

In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), Brick has fallen into despair after the suicide of his friend Skipper, who took his own life after a failed attempt at sexual intercourse with Maggie, Brick’s wife. At the heart of William’s play are the incessant insinuations about the nature of Brick and Skipper’s relationship, even by Brick himself. Jealous of their close bond, Maggie goads Skipper with accusations of homosexuality and, “He, poor Skipper, went to bed with Maggie to prove it wasn’t true,” Brick tells Big Daddy, “and when it didn’t work out, he thought it was true! – Skipper broke in two like a rotten stick – nobody ever turned so fast to a lush [emphasis in the original].” Skipper’s emotional tailspin of binge drinking ends in a phone call to Brick confessing his love for him. In reply Brick hangs up on him and soon after Skipper commits suicide. As Alan Sinfield points out, Brick exhibits all the characteristics of latent homosexuality, particularly in the way William’s has Brick tease out half-truths about what has gone on between Skipper and himself. Brick denies the relationship was anything but good and true and then hints of something more between them, recalling how when they “shared hotel-rooms we’d reach across the space between the two beds and shake hands to say goodnight, yeah, one or two times we –.” He suddenly stops speaking (T. Williams, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* 125,123; Sinfield, *Cultural Politics - Queer Reading* 45–46).

Included here is mention of Brick’s use of the word *Fairies* in his complaint that people are suspicious of very close friendships between two men. In his descriptive stage directions, Williams writes: “In his utterance of this word, we gauge the wide and profound reach of the
conventional mores he got from the world that crowned him with early laurel.” The condemnation provides the distance Brick needs from the accusation.

Homosexuality may be indirectly presented in *Streetcar* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in another, subtler way. More than any other playwright, Tennessee Williams’ female characters have been accused of being gay men embodied in female form. This may be because his women, like Blanche or Maggie, express an overt sexuality that is usually repressed by the society around them, much like the sexuality of gay men. In response, Williams freely admitted, “I am Blanche DuBois” (qtd. in Clum, *Still Acting Gay* 122–123).

Edward Albee was also accused of writing homosexual male characters in the guise of women when several critics observed that the repartee between George and Martha in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* more closely resembles that of two gay men than your average heterosexual couple. In Albee’s plays the pattern of tragic endings is also seen, sometimes in less overtly homosexual characters. In *The Zoo Story* (1959), a man declares himself a “h-o-m-o-s-e-x-u-a-l” to a stranger he meets on a bench. Eventually it is revealed that man, Jerry, has been so alienated from society that he has become suicidal and coerces the stranger into stabbing him to death. In *The American Dream* (1961), an adopted son is both literally and figuratively disembodied by his parents because he does not fit into their expectations of what a young man should be.

The exceptions to the “revelation equals death” pattern didn’t bode well for the gay movement either. In Robert Anderson’s *Tea and Sympathy* (1953), a young man is harassed about his unmanly habits, called a “sister boy,” and fails to perform sexually with a female prostitute. Anderson seems to have modeled this character’s struggle after the stereotypical
experiences of adolescent gay youth, which the character is accused of being throughout the play (Chauncey 357). Yet the character is “rescued” from homosexuality at the end of the story by the wife of his housemaster. For a gay audience member watching, while this might not be a literal suicide, indeed, it is a metaphoric death for the homosexual character, in the same sense that Shylock’s forced conversion to Christianity in Shakespeare’s Merchant of Venice is the death of the Jewish character.

Anxieties by both mainstream American audiences and playwrights before the 1960s kept portrayals of gays and lesbians from being dignified and were instead presented as being sometimes despicable, sometimes laughable, but most often invisible. In some cases the accusation of homosexuality alone was enough to add intrigue to the play, such as in Arthur Miller’s A View from the Bridge (1955), and Loring Mandel’s Advise and Consent (1960), based on the novel by Alan Drury. Despite censorship laws, some plays were allowed to present openly gay characters as long as their homosexuality was portrayed as criminal or with severely negative consequences, such as can be seen in William Inge’s two plays, The Boy in the Basement (written in the early 1950s but not published until 1962), and Natural Affection (1962) (Shewey, “Introduction” xiii).


In the early sixties, a new theatrical movement was taking shape, hidden away from the mainstream in small, off-off-Broadway theatres and cafes. Although laws prohibiting the presentation of homosexuality onstage were not overturned until 1967, pockets of gay theatrical expression began to arise in small venues throughout the city and would soon burst forth and make an indelible mark upon the American theatrical scene. On the tiny makeshift
stages of the small coffee houses of New York, plays written by unknown gay and lesbian authors served the triple purpose of bringing a like-minded community together through shared stories, enhancing a sense of self-esteem that was often deflated due to societal condemnation and isolation for both audience and performer, and bringing attention to the specific obstacles facing the subculture.

The most legendary of these café-theatre venues was Caffe Cino, a crucial creative space for gay work in the 1960s, where playwrights like Lanford Wilson, Jean-Claude van Itallie, Doric Wilson, and William Hoffman were produced regularly. Considered both the first off-off-Broadway theatre as well as the first gay theatre, Caffe Cino was opened in 1958 by the fiercely charismatic and openly gay Joe Cino. Soon after, he invited amateur poets, playwrights and other performing artists, most of whom were gay, to perform on a makeshift 8’ x 8’ stage that was lit by designer Johnny Todd using electricity stolen from the city grid by electrician Jon Torrey, Cino’s boyfriend. Many of the locals who answered Cino’s call had never written a play before but were inspired by his charisma and the opportunity to use a creative space. Under the encouragement of Joe Cino, from this demimonde would spring forth some of the most accomplished American playwrights of the era. One of those locals was Robert Patrick, who would go on to become one of the most produced off-off Broadway playwrights and the author of the acclaimed Kennedy’s Children (1974), along with many other award winning works. “If Joe ran a bowling alley, we would all be champion bowlers,” Patrick remarked, “It happened that he ran a theatre, so we wrote plays.” Patrick described the Cino as, “a religion, a philosophy, a community room, a school, a monastery, and it was building a culture” (qtd. in Caffe Cino).
Although the styles and approaches varied widely amongst the works staged at Caffe Cino, they were largely united by a common theme: identity. This made clear sense, as it spoke to the essential dilemma facing all gay men and women of the period who were often faced with intolerance and isolation, and forced to wrestle with the question of what it is to be homosexual in a heterosexual world. William Hoffman, another playwright who got his start at Cino and the author of *As Is*, recalled that, “everybody who came there had been suppressing some part of themselves, some vital, creative part of themselves which they could express at the Caffe Cino” (qtd. in *Caffe Cino*). The Cino plays focused on stories about self-discovery, about difference, about growing up gay in a heterosexual family, and perhaps most importantly, about self-esteem (Shewey, “Introduction” xi).

One of the earliest playwrights at Cino to focus on homosexual themes in a positive light was Doric Wilson, whose play *Now She Dances!* (1961), is a fantasia on the infamous trials of Oscar Wilde. One of the first plays to depict an unambiguously gay protagonist was Lanford Wilson’s *The Madness of Lady Bright* (1964). In this one-act, a preening queen begins to face the plight of growing old alone. Patrick’s play, *The Haunted Host* (1964), explores how an eccentric Greenwich village man deals with the guilt caused by his lover’s suicide.

The playwrights who established themselves at Cino soon broke out to form other theatres, such as Charles Ludlum, who teamed up with Kenneth Bernard to create The Ridiculous Theater Company, whose productions consistently pushed the boundaries of the presentation of gender, sexuality, and identity. Director Andy Milligan, who mounted many of the productions at Cino, joined Ellen Stewart to stage similar types of works just down the block at La Mama Experimental Theatre Club (ETC), a venue Stewart established in 1961 with the goal
of encouraging experimental young playwrights in a more Artaudian vein. La Mama ETC remains today an outlet for small theatre groups and playwrights in New York City. Marshall W. Mason, who directed many of Lanford Wilson’s works at the Cino, became a founder of Circle Repertory Theatre, along with Doric Wilson (no relation), where he served as artistic director for seventeen years while also becoming one of Broadway’s principal directors, receiving five Tony nominations for best director and a 2016 Lifetime Achievement Award (Tony Award Productions). Along with his work at Circle Rep, Doric Wilson also formed the first professional theatre company that focused exclusively on plays that spoke to the gay and lesbian experience called TOSOS (The Other Side of Silence) in 1974. TOSOS closed in 1979, but after taking a two decade hiatus, the company was revived as TOSOS II in 2002 and continues today to produce works focused on gay identity (“History of TOSOS”). These theatres were pivotal to establishing the off-off-Broadway scene and the plays performed inside them helped inspire the gay liberation movement (Sinfeld, *Out on Stage* 297–298).

Those who were looking for material outside of what was being commercially presented on Broadway would soon find succor in Manhattan’s off-Broadway scene in venues that were larger and more formal than The Cino or La Mama ETC. In 1968, Mart Crowley’s landmark play, *The Boys in the Band*, opened off-Broadway at Theater Four to critical praise. Acclaim for a play about a group of homosexual men at a birthday party would have been unimaginable only a decade earlier, but focused efforts by the community of theatre-makers in the smaller venues, such as Caffe Cino, La Mama ETC, and Al Carmines’ Judson Poets Theatre, had laid the foundations of acceptance for gay material on the stage and created a desire for more cutting-edge work among Manhattan audiences.
The Boys in the Band centers around the gathering of group of friends at the Upper East Side apartment of Michael, a single gay man in his thirties who is currently undergoing psychoanalysis as he wrestles with issues of self-esteem centered around his homosexuality. Michael is throwing a birthday party for Harold, a self-described, “thirty-two-year-old, ugly, pockmarked, Jew, fairy,” that is attended by five of their mutual friends, all openly gay men, as well as Alan, an unexpected guest, and “Cowboy,” a male prostitute who is there as a gift for Harold.

As the evening progresses, Michael becomes increasingly intoxicated and sardonic, venomously lashing out at his friends, particularly Harold, who he feels should share his misery at being homosexual. In response, Harold pointedly confronts Michael in the play’s climatic speech:

You’re a sad and pathetic man. You’re a homosexual and you don’t want to be. But there’s nothing you can do to change it. Not all your prayers to your god. Not all the analysis you can buy in all the years you have left to live. You may very well one day be able to know a heterosexual life if you want it desperately enough. If you pursue it with the fervor with which you annihilate. But you’ll always be homosexual as well. Always, Michael. Always. Until the day you die. (Crowley 99)

While the speech may seem vicious and sharp, Harold is ultimately trying to liberate Michael from self-hatred, so often seen in homosexuals of the time, through a sort of forced acceptance of his identity. It is also a stern rejection of the notion that a person can alter their sexual orientation/identity, whether through conversion therapy, still popular at the time, or through sheer will. Acknowledging the inherent and unalterable nature of one’s sexuality is a primary
step toward self-acceptance. The conflicting forces in Crowley’s play are self-hatred and self-esteem, or more specifically pride. Little progress can be made toward equality in civil rights unless those fighting truly believe those rights are honesty deserved, underscoring the adage that to gain acceptance one must first accept oneself. Self-acceptance, or pride, is necessary to lay the foundation for civil equality, which is the reason the organized marches that occur in a multitude of cities worldwide every June are referred to as “pride parades.”

Of *Boys in the Band*, French critic Georges-Michel Sarotte wrote, “The sight of men congregating, loving, laughing, crying like everyone else - whereas before they had only existed in novels or as members of a secret, infamous society - suddenly forced the audience to recognize that they were human beings like everyone else” (qtd.in Shewey, “Introduction” xiv). Sarotte’s comment captured the very essence of what these “identity plays” were struggling to achieve: to break through the long-held perceptions of difference and find a common humanity between straight and gay.

To a twenty-first century American audience, *The Boys in the Band* might seem more like an awkward, outdated portrait of a repressed, self-loathing community; a play that may have served its purpose during its run, but now insults both gay and straight sensibilities alike with its cast of stereotypically campy characters. However, the appearance of *The Boys in the Band*, and its successful run of over a thousand performances, was one of several social factors contributing to the Stonewall riots of June 1969 that incited the gay liberation movement of the early seventies. It also opened the gates to a flood of plays that explored identity or “coming out” by gay playwrights, many of whom dealt with the same themes of self-worth versus self-loathing that *The Boys in the Band* explored. After Stonewall, gays began to use the theatre as
both a tool in which they could communicate to their own community and as a means of revealing the reality of the gay experience to straight society (Rosenberg).

By the mid-seventies there were several venues for gay theatrical exhibition, however, these were largely dominated by men. But in 1976, two Cuban refugees, Anna Maria Simo and Magaly Alabau, who were looking for a performance space for lesbian women, founded Medusa’s Revenge. In an early press release, it was described as, “an experimental theatre dedicated to the creation of original plays ... exploring homo-esthetic sensibility” (qtd. in Davy 39). “I had a girlfriend at the time,” Simo said of Alabau, “who was an actress in the Spanish theatre in New York. She also worked at La Mama ... She was very dissatisfied with the roles she was getting as a woman. She suggested the idea of the lesbian space and a theatre where she could express herself” (qtd. in Davy 39–40). The community of actors and playwrights that formed at Medusa’s Revenge helped pave the way for The WOW Café Theatre which featured the talent of Peggy Shaw, Lois Weaver, Carmelita Tropicana, Sarah Schulman, Holly Hughes, and the tribe who would eventually become known as the Five Lesbian Brothers (Shewey, “Be True to Yearning” 126–128; Davy 39–43).

By the early seventies, Broadway also began to see openly gay characters, but primarily in works that were not considered gay theatre but were simply inclusive of a range of human diversity in common situations. These included Michael Cristopher’s Pulitzer Prize winning play, The Shadow Box (1977), Lanford Wilson’s Fifth of July (1978), Martin Sherman’s Bent (1979), and James Kirkwood, Nicholas Dante and Michael Bennet’s A Chorus Line (1975), which featured a nine-minute “coming out” monologue in the middle of a dance-musical. By the early eighties, the identity play was no longer about fighting isolation, combating feelings of self-
loathing, or dispelling the notion that all gay folks were “queers” living in gay ghettos like Greenwich Village or the Castro. Themes of pride, strength, and family began to appear in association with homosexual characters. Gay playwrights began to address broader themes that the larger society could identify with, transcending the idea of a ghetto theatre in which the community simply reflected on itself (Shewey, “Introduction” xi).

In 1978, Harvey Fierstein wrote the first in a trilogy of one-act plays that centered on the fictional life of Arnold Beckoff, a gay man and part-time drag queen. Fierstein had acted at La Mama for years, including an appearance in Andy Warhol’s only fully-staged play, *Pork* (1971) before trying his hand at playwriting. His first one-act, entitled *The International Stud*, has elements of musical theatre with monologues and brief two-character scenes intertwined with torch songs. Fierstein, who played Arnold, tells the story of one gay man’s search for love while trying to maintain his dignity. Yet *The International Stud* differs from previous gay male-centered plays like *The Boys in the Band* by focusing on the similarities between straight and gay people rather than the differences. In doing this, Arnold’s struggle is more relatable to heterosexual audiences and significantly less bewailing. Fierstein used a different style of storytelling for his second piece, *A Fugue in a Nursery*, which opened in 1979 at La Mama. In *Fugue*, Fierstein transports us from the cabaret feel of *The International Stud* to a more metaphorical setting, with all the action occurring on a gigantic bed. For the final part of his trilogy, *Widows and Children First!* (1979), Fierstein tackles weightier issues of family and loss. In 1982, all three plays were moved to Broadway for an evening called *Torch Song Trilogy*, and Harvey Fierstein was given two Tony Awards for his efforts in acting and playwriting. Fierstein would continue writing into the next era of gay themed theatre.
Jane Chambers’ *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove*, which opened at the Actor’s Studio in New York in December 1980 and was produced by John Glines (who also produced *Torch Song*), explores identity among a group of lesbians who are gathered for their annual beachside vacation. The friends welcome a supposedly heterosexual Eva into their midst. Newly divorced, Eva is initially unaware that she is among a group of lesbians. She soon falls in love with the spirited Lil, whose family has abandoned after coming out, despite knowing she has been diagnosed with cancer. Chambers wrote the piece in reaction to years of previous representations of lesbians as psychotic (*The Killing of Sister George*, 1964), suicidal (*The Children’s Hour*) or simply non-existent. While *Bluefish Cove* presents a similar situation as *Boys in the Band* (it has been referred to as “Girls in the Sand”), it is free from the campy hysteries and zingy one-liners of Crowley’s play, and explores self-acceptance with a more political, feminist bent. The comparison between these two works, written a decade apart, seemed problematic for Chambers. “*The Boys in the Band* was negative; the characters didn’t like themselves,” Chambers said, “Maybe *Bluefish Cove* will open the door for lesbian characters” (qtd. in Klein). Tragically, Chambers, like her lead character, was diagnosed with cancer soon after the play’s premiere and died two years later (Klein; Landau; A. Williams, “Last Summer at Bluefish Cove (Review)”).

By the early 1980s, gay and lesbian representation on the American stage had reached new heights and gay playwrights could now truly follow the adage, “write what you know.” Not only in New York, but regional theatre companies across the United States began to produce gay-themed pieces like Sidney Morris’ *If this Isn’t Love* (1982), Adele Prandini’s *A Safe Light* (1984), James Carroll Pickett’s *Dream Man* (1986), and a multitude of plays by Christopher
Durang. The number of openly gay playwrights whose work was being performed on and off Broadway increased along with that of openly gay directors and choreographers. The relationship between the gay community and the American theatrical community had solidified. Theatre had become the primary voice for the gay community in America by the early 1980s. A voice that they would soon desperately need.


As mentioned earlier, *The Normal Heart* opened at the Public Theatre in New York in April 1985. The reviews gave it high praise, with *Newsweek*’s Jack Kroll writing that it was, “An extraordinary play! It is bracing and exciting to hear so much passion and intelligence. Kramer produces a crossfire of life-and-death energies that create a fierce and moving human drama”(Kroll). But for Kramer, good press was neither a mark of the play’s success nor the goal of his endeavor. After five years of trying to draw attention to a new disease that had killed many of his close friends and devastated his community, he wanted change. Kramer wanted a change in the neglectful city policy, under what he regarded as the disdainful leadership of Mayor Ed Koch, that earmarked a fraction of the necessary funds to fight a disease that had already been reported in thousands of people. Kramer also wanted a change in what he viewed as the contemptible attitude of the press, whose commanding standard bearer, *The New York Times*, seemed to have gone out of its way to ignore AIDS, which had until only recently been referred to as Gay Related Immune Disorder (Shilts 531, 556–557). Having exhausted all other means of gathering support to fight the quickly spreading epidemic, Kramer turned to the stage, which had by now proven itself to be an invaluable tool for New York’s gay community. Using the ancient craft of theatre, he successfully changed not only public policy, but public
sentiment and in doing so helped to prolong the lives of hundreds of sufferers of the disease. In the long history of the theatre, there have been few occasions where direct change in law and perception had been affected by a single play.

However, the Public Theatre’s *The Normal Heart* was not the first major production to address the AIDS crisis. William Hoffman’s *As Is* opened only five weeks earlier at Circle Repertory Theatre, directed by his fellow Cino alum Marshall W. Mason. The two plays were not just effective pieces of political theatre, they signaled the beginning of a new thematic movement for gay and lesbian playwrights. In the previous two and a half decades, LGBTQ playwrights had learned to use the power of the stage to bring about positive change in redefining their own communal identity and their place in American culture. In doing so they established a vital solidarity with a preponderance of the nation’s theatrical community. Now these same playwrights, along with those in their community that they had inspired to action, would use this solidarity to focus on a microscopic virus that had upended their lives. As Larry Kramer put it, “In the history of homosexuality, we have never before been so close to death and extinction” (Kramer, *Reports from the Holocaust: The Story of an AIDS Activist* 33).

Within the gay subculture of New York City, a sense of tremendous despair and betrayal had overcome the day to day lives of the populace. Behind the walls of many of the brownstones and narrow apartment complexes of Chelsea, Greenwich Village and Alphabet City neighborhoods, gay men lay dying in their beds, tortured by an array of exotic diseases that had manifested themselves through lesions, wasting, dementia and pneumonia. AIDS had struck at a time when the fight for the equal rights of homosexuals, which began with the Stonewall uprising of 1969, had started to gain momentum. But it was not the disease alone
that had altered the trajectory of the movement. The 1980 election of President Ronald Reagan heralded a new era of conservative backlash against the progressive movements of the sixties and seventies while proliferating a tone of intolerance toward homosexuals and others in the name of family values. The virus had arrived at a time when the American political landscape was increasingly treacherous for gay men and women.

For gay men living in urban meccas like New York and San Francisco, despair and discouragement over the epidemic reached its pinnacle in 1985 as, one by one, friends and loved ones succumbed to the disease. A common reality among individuals that the contraction of the virus and the tortured death that followed were inevitable. Treatment of the disease seemed out of reach and the rage that would eventually lead to the formation of the activist group ACT-UP had not yet coalesced.

Throughout the 1980s, theatre was the primary creative mode by which gay men expressed their shock, horror, and anger at what was happening to their community; a community that had struggled for centuries to build up even the smallest amount of acceptance. Throughout the first two decades of the AIDS epidemic, the hundreds of playwrights who had written about identity, pride, and human dignity in the 1970s were now turning their focus toward death. For many of these playwrights, writing had become more than just a creative output. It became a way of dealing with the death that was taking place all around them. Years of bottled up repression had led to an era of uninhibited sexual expression, which in turn led to the rapid spread of the HIV virus in the gay male community. Some of these AIDS themed plays were produced, many were not.
“Coming out” or establishing a communal identity was no longer the dilemma of these works. Instead, these plays shared a common invisible and unstoppable protagonist, at least in Aristotelian terms, since all the action is in response to the virus (Feingold xi–xiv). This protagonist forced the characters to confront destiny in terms hearkening back to Greek tragedy. Unanswerable fate provided the dramatic tension as some characters had their lives truncated while others were left inexplicably untouched. The creators of these works were simply reflecting onto the stage the reality they observed around them, particularly since many of those affected were performing artists – the actors, dancers, directors, choreographers and designers these dramatists had worked with for decades. For these playwrights, who suddenly found themselves attending memorial services for men in their twenties and thirties with alarming frequency, it was as if a war had broken out, except that the nation was not behind them urging them to fight on with patriotic fervor.

Both The Normal Heart and As Is proclaimed the same theme, which defined this era of gay playwriting: “silence equals death.” This slogan, inspired by the famous poem attributed to Pastor Martin Niemöller about the lack of action taken by the intellectuals of Germany during the Nazis’ rise to power, became the battle cry for the activist group ACT-UP, which was founded by Larry Kramer:

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out –
Because I was not a Socialist.
Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out –
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out –
Because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for me –
and there was no one left to speak for me. (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum)

Kramer’s play is a semi-autobiographical staging of his early efforts to bring attention to the epidemic while experiencing the decline and death of his lover. One of the most notable aspects of the Public’s production was the scene design by Eugene Lee and Keith Raywood in which the names of real-life victims of the disease appeared on the surrounding walls along with facts about the spreading epidemic, such as the total number of infections. These names and facts were updated before every performance (Kramer, “The Normal Heart” and “The Destiny of Me”: Two Plays 15). While The Normal Heart is a pointed piece of political theatre drawn from the trenches of a burgeoning movement, Hoffman’s work is more intimately focused on a couple, Saul and Rich, and their small group of friends who face the ordeal of Rich’s infection and death. Both works, opening within a few weeks of each other and garnering wide critical acclaim (Drama Desk Award for Outstanding play for As Is), had the effect of shaking those in the gay community who had buried their heads in the sand in regard to the diseases’ catastrophic effects on their community, while also drawing national attention to the political obstacles faced by those who were actively attempting to stem the tide of infection and death (Rich).

The AIDS epidemic would spawn many other works for the stage, including some of the most acclaimed in the history of the American theatre. Harvey Fierstein’s Safe Sex, a humorous look at changes in behavior of the gay community since the advent of HIV, opened in 1987. Richard Greenberg, who had established himself as a cutting-edge young playwright at the Ensemble Studio Theatre, made his Broadway debut with Eastern Standard (1988), a smart,
cosmopolitan piece about yuppies, homelessness, and unlikely alliances, which begins with a young man revealing to his sister that he has AIDS. Brother-sister relationships are also explored in Paula Vogel’s *The Baltimore Waltz* (1990), in which a woman takes a lively trip to Europe with her dying brother, something that in real-life Vogel was never able to do because of her own brother’s death from AIDS. *The Baltimore Waltz* is one of several works by lesbian playwrights that deals with AIDS. Susan Sontag worked with Edward Parone on the stage adaptation of her acclaimed short story, *The Way We Live Now* (1990), which was first published in *The New Yorker* in 1986 (Drake). Jean-Claude van Itallie, whose works had been previously staged at Caffe Cino and La Mama ETC, wrote *Ancient Boys* (1990), about an artist coping with his AIDS diagnosis. The play was first staged in the Loft Theatre at the University of Colorado, Boulder, before its official debut at La Mama in 1991 (Plunka 256–259). Composer and lyricist William Finn revisited characters he created a decade earlier in his musical one-acts, *In Trousers* (1979), and *March of the Falsettos* (1981), and explored how they dealt with the intrusion of AIDS into their lives in *Falsettoland* (1990). The last two parts of his musical trilogy were presented together on Broadway in 1992, under the title *Falsettos* and received two Tony Awards, for best book and best original score. Plays inspired by the AIDS epidemic by such playwrights as Lanford Wilson, Christopher Durang, Terrence McNally, and many others, would open on and off Broadway (Lefkowitz). In a sense, these plays were paving the way for the creation of a work of epic theatre that would become a landmark in American theatrical achievement.

On May 4, 1993, after a series of workshops and trial productions on both the West Coast and in the United Kingdom, part one of Tony Kushner’s dramatic epic *Angels in America*
opened at the Walter Kerr Theatre on Broadway, with the subtitle *Millennium Approaches*. Part two, *Perestroika*, joined it in repertory five months later. Upon its arrival on the New York stage, critics began to compare the epic favorably with some of the greatest plays of the twentieth century (Fisher, *The Theatre of Tony Kushner: Living Past Hope* 1). The entire work was given the additional subtitle of *A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, an indication of Kushner’s desire to address, “some of the issues I felt about being gay at the time” (qtd. in Vries).

The particular time Kushner is referring to was a period four years earlier when he began to write the play. He was living in New York City, an openly gay man immersed in the overlapping theatrical and gay male communities which had by that time already been devastated by the epidemic (Nielsen 5–11). In his 2001 book *The Theater of Tony Kushner*, James Fisher, who has written extensively about the playwright and his works, talks about the situation Kushner, like other American gay male playwrights at the time, found himself in. Fisher writes, “written by Kushner during a time in which he despaired about America’s sharp swing to the political right and its homophobic response to the AIDS crisis, *Angels* presents the mid-1980s as a critical transitional period in the history of the nation” (Fisher, *The Theatre of Tony Kushner* 2).

Like many gay men, Kushner had lost several friends to the disease. It was under these circumstances that he felt compelled to write a play that, as Fisher puts it, “took its audience into the profound personal suffering masked by Reagan’s ‘Morning in America’ and the anti-gay rhetoric of the AIDS pandemic” (Fisher, *Tony Kushner: New Essays* 2). The result is a work that looks at abandonment in many forms and includes a complex dramatic universe in which God,
in the form of an aleph glyph (a flaming Hebrew letter), has abandoned heaven, leaving the angels behind to endure, “a time of crisis and confusion” without him (Kushner, *Angels in America, Part Two* 39–44).

In *Angels*, the character of Prior Walter, suffering from AIDS and the lesions, gastrointestinal pains, and nausea that so often go with it, and having recently been abandoned by his boyfriend, finds himself face to face with an angel who has bombarded her way into the bedroom of his New York apartment. She commands him to carry out a set of preordained tasks which mirror the events described by Joseph Smith during the first days in the founding of Mormonism.

Kushner infuses his epic with references to the events of the 1950s, particularly through the character of Roy Cohn, his lightly-fictionalized version of the real-life attorney. Kushner uses the Roy Cohn character to highlight the connection between the philosophies of greed and corruption surrounding the Reagan administration and the mayhem and chaos caused by the reckless abandonment of the angel’s god.

At the core of *Angels in America* is an examination of the effects on a society where the values of compassion, understanding, and inclusion are reneged upon. Kushner has reiterated in a multitude of interviews and essays that the impetus for writing the play was the ineptitude and the shirking of responsibility by the Reagan administration. Speaking in a televised interview with Charlie Rose marking the twentieth anniversary of the play, Kushner speculated on its success, remarking that, “The country did not face up to its responsibility and *Angels* arrived at a moment when it was starting to take stock of that” (“Charlie Rose”). Now, twenty years after *Angels in America* appeared in the American theatrical landscape, Kushner’s play
reminds us to look back, now armed with the clarity that distance provides, and contemplate where we, as a nation, went wrong and ponder how many lives might have been saved under the leadership of a more enlightened and compassionate president.

Since Angels, American theatre has seen Paul Rudnick’s comedy Jeffrey (1993), about a gay man who gives up sex because of AIDS, Terrence McNally’s Tony and Drama Desk Award-winning Love! Valour! Compassion! (1994), a work reminiscent of Chekhov’s The Cherry Orchard (1904), but with a cast of all gay male characters, in which a group of friends meet at a summer house in upstate New York over the course of three holiday weekends.

The gay community also used the theatrical arts to deal with the AIDS crisis in forms other than traditionally text-centered productions. Tim Miller, who gained notoriety as one of the “NEA four”, has performed his autobiographical solo pieces on stages across the country and the threat of HIV underscored his material written in the late eighties and early nineties. There was even a support group in San Francisco for people with HIV/AIDS that used playwriting as a form of therapy and community-building.

Gay men and lesbians were not the only people writing plays about AIDS, however, as established heterosexual playwrights, such as Steve Dietz and David Rabe, have also portrayed the effects of the epidemic using dramatic form. One of the last Broadway productions to deal with the consequences of AIDS was also one of the most commercially successful. Jonathan Larson’s musical Rent is an adaptation of Puccini’s opera La Bohème. Larson replaced tuberculosis with AIDS and set it in the East Village, rather than the Latin Quarter of Paris. In Rent, the action takes place in a utopic version of Alphabet City in Manhattan, where race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation are not issues, and people of all colors and sexualities
intermingle as they struggle under the threat of AIDS and gentrification. Like many of the plays in this genre, the theme of Rent (1994), “no day but today,” is a call to live in the moment and not place stock in an uncertain future.

Looking back at the breadth of American theatre in the twentieth century, one can see that these thematic changes in the way gays and lesbian are represented on the stage served as both cause and effect. Works by gay playwrights helped increase acceptance of gay lives. As tolerance and understanding grew, the representation of homosexual characters on the stage became more human and more frequent. As they passed through these distinct thematic eras of representation on the American stage, gays and lesbians have gone, in fifty years’ time, from having laws forbidding their portrayal on the stage to the ability to use theatre as a call to arms.


Beginning in the late nineties, the focus of gay theatre moved away from AIDS toward other political issues such as the military’s “Don’t ask, don’t tell” policy and the legalization of same-sex marriage, but it was not with the same unity and collective focus given to the primary themes seen in the previous decades.

“Don’t ask, don’t tell” (DADT) was a department of defense directive which went into effect in 1994 after being signed into law by President Bill Clinton, whose initial intent was to provide some protections for gay and lesbian service members. While members of the United States Military had been discharged from service for homosexual acts since the Revolutionary War, the concentrated targeting of gay military service members for dismissal is a phenomenon specific to the late twentieth century. Shifts in public opinion during the early 1990s had called the policy into question (Frank 1). During his 1992 presidential campaign, Clinton had stated his
intention to allow all qualified citizens to serve in the U.S. Military regardless of their sexual orientation and once in office he began to push for repeal of the ban. However, Clinton’s objective was sidetracked by Congress and the major consequence of the final piece of legislation was the discharging of more than 14,500 service personnel over the course of its seventeen-year period of enforcement (Gardina). Several theatre companies staged works in reaction to this policy. Theatre Rhinoceros, the first professional theatre company in the United States to focus exclusively on gay themed work, produced Fighting Mac (2011), by John Fisher, in which the experiences of an American soldier fighting in Afghanistan are juxtaposed against those of a celebrated, openly gay colonel in the British Army (Hurwitt). The Kansas City Repertory Theatre produced Marc Wolf’s Another American: Asking and Telling (2010), based on a series of interviews conducted with former military soldiers who had been discharged due to the policy (Walker).

Clinton also presided over the enactment of 1996’s Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), which denied married same-sex couples federal benefits generally granted to opposite-sex couples and allowed states to not recognize same-sex marriages performed outside their domain. On the American stage, the effect of the bill was to bring focus to an issue which essentially had been in existence since time immemorial: that same-sex couples have never been allowed to marry.

An interesting series of events led to the creation of Dustin Lance Black’s 8 (2011), which premiered at the Eugene O’Neil Theatre with a cast of highly established actors. After the California Supreme Court’s decision not to release the video tape of the Perry v. Schwarzenegger case in which Proposition 8, California’s anti-gay marriage law, was
overturned, Black, an Academy Award winning writer for his screenplay for *Milk* (2008), created the text for *8* based on the court transcript, in many cases lifting entire sections verbatim. The New York production of *8* was followed a few months later by a West Coast performance with a cast led by George Clooney and Brad Pitt that was subsequently broadcast nationwide (Healy, “Play About Proposition 8 by Dustin Lance Black”).

The post-epidemic period of gay theatre focused on these two political issues along with the occasional re-emergence of the “coming out” play where the central character in question now tended to be a figure of public prominence such as a politician or sports figure. This is the case with Richard Greenberg’s *Take Me Out* (2002), in which the dilemma at hand is not the personal struggle of the individual to come to terms with their own sexuality but the public’s reaction to this personal revelation. Gay theatre as a genre maintained its identity by thematically addressing issues which were simultaneously prime subjects in both national news coverage and the public forum.

Yet in a remarkably short interval, the fight for equality for non-heterosexual people succeeded in the dismissal of both policies. In December 2010, the U.S. Senate struck down the ban on gay men and women serving openly in the military. Perhaps the most revealing aspect of the Senate vote in terms of a political shift on social issues is that eight Republican Senators voted to dissolve the ban (Hulse). Then on June 26, 2013, the Supreme Court issued dual rulings striking down the central provisions of DOMA, as well as refusing to side with proponents of California's Proposition 8. Overnight a potential canon of gay themed plays became obsolete as acceptance of equality had now become mainstream. The shifting political climate supported by a comparatively swift change in public opinion prevented “Don't ask, don’t tell” and same-
sex marriage from receiving the same focused attention from LGBTQ playwrights that the AIDS crisis had garnered. The issues had led to a smattering of plays produced in New York and regionally, but nothing resembling the impact of Kramer’s Normal Heart or Kushner’s Angels in America.

Certainly, there are further political obstacles for the movement to tackle, including the passage of laws banning discrimination in employment and housing in the seventeen states which currently offer no protections, as well as new initiatives, such as North Carolina’s 2016 Public Facilities Privacy & Security Act (HB2) that requires individuals to only use the public restrooms that correspond to the sex indicted on their birth certificate. But the respite in momentum caused by socio-political shifts of the early 2010s seems to have encouraged playwrights to change their focus back to more personal narratives that explore the ways in which existing heteronormative forces create day to day obstacles for gay people.

**Historical Context: Summary**

Before the mid-1930s, few playwrights revealed their homosexuality in public and even fewer created openly gay characters. Due to strict censorship laws, representation of gay or lesbian characters on the American stage consisted primarily of comic stereotypes. After the mid-1930s, homosexuality began to be addressed on the stage, however, it was usually considered a “problem” that needed to be expunged, which often led to the suicide of a lesbian or gay character. Beginning in the late fifties, gay and lesbian playwrights came together to form loose collectives in establishments such as Caffe Cino, where they could share their work with each other and the local community, eventually building their own canon of plays unified by a common theme: identity. The “identity plays” of the sixties and seventies helped unite and
define the gay liberation movement, while reducing isolation and infusing a sense of pride. This was followed by the “AIDS plays” of the eighties and nineties, which drew attention to an epidemic that led to increased government funding, improved healthcare, and more expedient pharmaceutical research and distribution, while increasing compassion and understanding. These two distinct eras, of what could questionably be termed Gay Theatre, highlight a unique community of playwrights united by a “common difference.” It is a difference that is defined simply by who they love. Perhaps unknowingly, these playwrights focused on mutual objectives that have successfully addressed the dilemma at hand. Beginning in the late nineties, when access to protease inhibitors and other anti-viral drugs in the United States allowed people with HIV/AIDS to lead significantly longer and healthier lives, there was less urgency on the part of these playwrights, and the American theatrical community in general, to focus on the disease. While some LGBTQ playwrights continued to focus on socio-political issues, such as same-sex marriage and the right to serve openly in the military, these concerns did not produce genre-defining themes or lead to the creation of significant works in the American theatrical canon.

During second half of the twentieth-century, the LGBTQ playwrights had learned, perhaps out of necessity, to use theatre as a primary voice to address their concerns. American playwrights who identified as gay or lesbian had become well-represented among the nation’s most acclaimed playwrights. But did the conclusion of the “AIDS play” era signify an end to the LGBT-identified playwrights’ focused use of theatre-making as a tool for political engagement? Would there be another specific issue that would capture the attention of gay playwrights in large numbers the way AIDS did?
Theoretical Framework: Inciting Incidences

In April 2009, Sirdeaner L. Walker found her eleven-year-old son, Carl, hanging by an extension cord on the second floor of the family’s home. She had almost left the house on her way to a meeting with school authorities to discuss the constant name-calling Carl was receiving from his peers at school when she went upstairs to check on him. Although Sirdeaner felt Carl was far too young to know his sexuality, his classmates had repeatedly called him “girlie,” “gay,” and “fag,” ever since he had entered the sixth grade. She described her son as a slight child who loved his schoolwork, had been active in his church, helped the needy, played a wise-man in the Christmas play, and was active in a local black history program. "That’s the type of kid he was," Sirdeaner said. "You could rely and count on him." Carl had spoken with his mother several times about what he was experiencing at school. After his death Sirdeaner recalled these conversations and said the torment her son experienced was worse than the breast cancer she had survived four years earlier (James).

On September 19, 2010, Seth Walsh, a thirteen-year-old boy from Tehachapi, California, was found hanging by a tree, unconscious, by his single mother, Wendy, who rushed him to the hospital where he died after lingering on life-support for a week. Even before Seth came out as gay, he was perpetually picked on for his manners and style of dress, his family said. The torments became bad enough that Seth was homeschooled on two separate occasions. "Since it was a rumor that went around, everyone thought he was gay," his best friend, Jaime Phillips, recalled, telling reporters that Seth finally came out to him a year earlier. His family spoke of how in recent months he seemed unhappy and began to read the Bible. The family suggested that Seth tried to alter his sexuality when peers began to torment him. “He started getting
teased by the fourth and fifth grade," said his grandmother, Judy Walsh, a retired school teacher. "By sixth grade, the kids were starting to get mean. By the seventh grade, he was afraid to walk home from school because he was afraid he would get harassed," Judy continued, “As he was walking by a classroom, a kid yelled out, ‘queer’ ... stuff like that ... He spent a lot of his life frightened.” The bullying came at him in many forms including phone calls, Facebook posts, and physical encounters. Tehachapi Police were investigating rumors of a particularly aggressive bullying incident that took place at a nearby park on the day Seth hanged himself. Judy remembers Seth returning home from the park, taking a shower, and then asking to borrow a pen. He then went out to the backyard saying that he was going to play with the family dogs. A while later his horrified mother found him in the tree and fought to save him. “Wendy told me when she put him on the ground, she knew his soul was gone,” said Jim, Wendy’s father. Seth’s funeral was attended by more than six hundred people from the surrounding community about 120 miles north of Los Angeles. Seth’s younger brother, Shawn, wearing a yellow plaid shirt - Seth’s favorite color - told the assembled mourners, “I wish I could have protected him. I just wish people could have been nice to him like my mom told me” (qtd. in Alexander).

Before the funeral service, the pastor of the First Baptist Church in Tehachapi, where the service was held, told reporters that the focus of the service was, "going to be on Seth and his life, not on the bullying and not on the homosexuality." This is a curious statement when one considers that being bullied because of his gayness had become an increasing larger and unrelenting part of his life and the very reason for his death (Alexander; McKinley).
In 2012, Kenneth Weishuhn, a high school freshman in Paullina, Iowa, took his own life after being bullied and receiving continuous death threats through both his cellphone and a Facebook page a month after coming out as gay. His sister, Kayla, said that his friends at South O’Brien High School in O’Brien County turned on Kenneth after he told them he was gay and the boys in her sophomore class started bullying him. “He thought he had friends, he soon found out just how cruel teens can be. They turned on him,” Kayla said, “A lot of people, they either joined in or they were too scared to say anything” (qtd. in Hector). The bullies created a hate group against gays on Facebook and added Kenneth’s friends as members. Soon Kenneth started receiving death threats on his phone. Like Seth Walsh, Kenneth also took his life by hanging himself (Blocer).

In January 2013, Jadin Bell, a fifteen-year-old high school sophomore in La Grande, Oregon, was taken off life-support a week after hanging himself on a playground structure at Central Elementary School. His family says that he had been bullied both online and in person for being gay and the bullying had become so bad that Jadin had asked his parents to please home school him. Jadin had spoken with officials at his school about the problem, but when asked later about any action they had taken on Jadin’s behalf, they responded that they were still investigating the situation. At a vigil following his burial, Jadin was remembered by friends as an “amazing young man,” as someone who loved cheerleading and volunteered at the local assisted living home for seniors. His mother made a plea to those who had driven her son to suicide. “The next time you are thinking of being unkind to someone,” she said, “think to yourself, ‘If that person was a member of your family, would you want them treated like that?’ Don’t treat them like that.” Family friend Bud Hill told reporters, “He was different. And they
tend to pick on the different ones” (qtd. in M. E. Williams, “Another Bullied Gay Teen Commits Suicide”).

More than four hundred people attended the funeral of Josh Pacheco, a seventeen-year-old junior at Linden High School in Fenton, Michigan. Several of his teachers confirmed that Josh had been bullied for being gay, yet his mother, Lynn, says she was never told of her son’s hardship while he was still alive. Josh had come out to his mother just two months earlier; Lynn said she wasn’t surprised by Josh’s revelation and loved her son just the same. Only after his death did she find out that her son was being pushed into lockers and teased at school. It did not surprise Lynn that he never mentioned his bullying to her. “Josh never wanted to make anyone else upset,” she said. On November 27, 2012, the afternoon of his suicide, Josh’s stepfather, Michael Capehart, saw Josh’s Facebook status, quoting a line from Bilbo Baggins, a character in the JRR Tolkien’s “Lord of the Rings” books. “I regret to announce that this is the end. I’m going now. I bid you all a very fond farewell. Goodbye,” the post read, and it immediately worried Michael. He knew his stepson had stayed home from school due to an illness that day, so Capehart called his neighbor to check on Josh. He was found unresponsive in his truck, which had been running in the closed-up garage. Josh had left a note in the truck which read, “I’m sorry I wasn’t able to be strong enough” (qtd. in Schuch; Warren).

Emilie Olsen was a thirteen-year-old Ohio girl who was continually harassed and assaulted before finally taking her life in December 2014. A fake social media account entitled, “Emilie Olsen is gay” was set up and filled with false accusations concerning Emilie engaging in sexual relations with various individuals in a nearby woods. Emilie, who is of Chinese descent and was adopted by her parents when she was nine months old, was often ridiculed for not
being white and she was labeled “fake country” because she wore cowboy boots and camouflage. Several white students at her school teased that she could not be “country” because she was Asian. She was also repeatedly called “gay” even though she had never given any indication of her sexual identity. According to a lawsuit filed by her parents after her death against Fairfield City School District, Emilie suffered severe anguish, distress and depression as a result of this harassment and often sat by herself in the lunchroom without eating. The lawsuit claims that at one time, when Emilie was in the sixth grade, she was followed into the restroom by a fellow student who had been harassing her. The student handed her a razor and told her to end her life. This same student later posted on Facebook, “Go cut one of your vanes and die cuz I will be glad [sic].” In addition, phrases such as "Emilie is a whore" and "Go kill yourself Emilie" were scribbled on the bathroom stalls on more than one occasion. After posting that she was having thoughts of suicide to her friends on Facebook, Emile put a loaded gun to her head and pulled the trigger (Boroff).

Alyssa Morgan, a seventh-grade student at Southeast Polk Junior High School in Des Moines, Iowa, took her own life on April 3, 2015, by hanging herself in her family's garage. Her body was found by her mother, Nicole Morgan, who reported that not long before the tragedy, Alyssa had come out to her family and friends as bisexual, which apparently intensified the bullying she was receiving at school. In response to her daughter’s coming out to the family, Nicole said that, “All of us told her we don’t care; that it doesn’t bother us and we love her no matter what.” But the opposite seems to have occurred at school and Alyssa began to be teased and tormented for being bisexual. According to her mother, the once joyful and friendly Alyssa began spending time alone in her room and took to cutting herself. “When you have
other people telling you that you're not worthy of anything, or that being bisexual is wrong or somehow disgusting... they're going to take that into thought,” her mother said. Nicole believes that the school did not do enough to stop the harassment that her daughter was receiving in a daily basis. Alyssa’s mother said the twelve-year-old had seemed fine just twenty minutes before entering the garage and hanging herself. Alyssa left a suicide note scrawled on a piece of notebook paper that read, “I'm sorry... for everything... I just can't anymore... I love you all. Goodbye” (qtd. in Farberov).

Theoretical Framework: Facts and Statistics

While suicide is the most devastating and undeniable effect of bullying, multiple studies have demonstrated that the long-term effects of being bullied include increased levels of depression, anxiety, and psychosomatic symptoms (Collier, Bos, and Sandfort 9–14). The social exclusion and isolation that often accompanies bullying denies children friendship and communal interaction. Those children who have experienced long-term bullying have a more challenging time forming healthy relationships and develop characteristics such as shyness and restraint in offering opinions, which may mistakenly come across as a sign of low-intelligence and, as a result, they suffer academically and therefore tend to have more difficulty achieving successful and fulfilling lives (Sullivan 34).

The incidents mentioned above each involved the victims being bullied due to the perception or admission of non-heteronormative behavior. Of course, children, adolescents and even adults are verbally and physically harassed for myriad reasons. For children and teens, most instances of bullying revolve around difference. These differences include an array of physical characteristics; such as being obese, skinny, having red-hair, wearing glasses, having a
different skin color than the other children, wearing a hearing aid, etc. However, as Ken Rigby, a professor of social psychology who is widely published in the area of bullying, points out, the specific causes of bullying may be more complex than they appear, especially to teachers and parents:

Almost everybody has physiological idiosyncrasies that marks him or her out from others. We see a fat person being bullied and assume that obesity is the explanation, forgetting that many other bulky people are free from any kind of harassment. Yet doubt remains. The literature on disability and bullying makes it clear that some physical differences can and sometimes do give rise to bullying. Generalizing about physical differences needs to be more specific. (Rigby 171)

Psychological differences, such as being introverted, anxious, and low in social competence can also spur harassment. Children who are bullied for psychological difference are usually aware that they are being targeted due to their outward behavior and may attempt to adjust, change or act in ways that are uncharacteristic for them and not true to their own nature, which may include becoming a bully themselves. Social differences, such as gender, disability, religion, race or ethnic group, as well as the social class of one’s family, can be an inciting reason for being bullied. These types of differences are generally unchangeable (Rigby 172). Chapters Three and Four will explore issues of bullying surrounding gender and race, respectively, and will consider the two dramatic works that deal specifically with those topics.

According to a survey of 4,700 children aged eleven through sixteen, published in 2000, approximately 75 percent reported being the target of some form of mild bullying within the school year, but 7 percent admitted to more severe forms of bullying, such as physical bullying, repeated verbal abuse, social exclusion, or property damage (Glover et al. 141–142). Another
study, conducted in 2001, involving more than 15,000 U.S. students in grades six to ten, found that 29.9 percent had been involved in frequent or moderate bullying, with 13 percent of those reporting that they acted as the perpetrator, 10.6 percent saying that they were victims, and 6.3 percent saying they had acted as both bully and victim at one time or another (Nansel et al.).

The rates of bullying are drastically different, however, for one particular demographic than for those who are targeted for physical, psychological and social difference alone. Since 1999, the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) has conducted its biannual National School Climate Survey, which reports on the safety, mental health and educational climate of LGBTQ youth in middle and high schools. The 2013 survey consisted of 7,898 students from all 50 states who identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, queer, questioning or unsure. The survey found that 74 percent of LGBTQ youth were repeatedly verbally harassed in the past year because of their sexual orientation and 55 percent because of their gender expression. Thirty-three percent of LGBTQ students were physically harassed (shoved, pushed, etc.) within the previous year, while 17 percent were physically assaulted (punched, kicked, or injured by a weapon). As a result of feeling unsafe or uncomfortable, 30 percent missed at least one day of school within a month of answering the survey. Sixty percent reported hearing homophobic slurs or remarks, which is down considerably from the 80 percent that reported hearing them in the 2001 survey. Of particular note is the study’s finding that, while certain school programs and public initiatives have benefited lesbian and gay youth in recent years, transgender youth remain both understudied and underserved and are still victimized at high rates due to their gender expression (Kosciw, Greytak, et al.).
Bullying against LGBT-identified and perceived youth in schools has led to a high dropout rate and, unsurprisingly, a higher runaway rate than non-LGBTQ teens. It is estimated that up to forty percent of the homeless teen population in certain areas are LGBT. In addition, the suicide rate for LGBTQ teens remains three to four times higher than for their heterosexual counterparts. This problem is not limited to middle or high school teens, but extends to college and university students, as well as other adults. For LGBTQ African-American males and Hispanic females, those rates are even higher (Biegel xviii, 127-128).

All the children mentioned in the previous section were victims of bullying that occurred within the last decade. But the harassments, verbal and physical torments, and violent assaults against LGBTQ or LGBT-perceived children and teenagers are certainly not a twenty-first century phenomenon. As mentioned in Chapter One, the terminology used to describe both the demographics and the actions are far more recent than the occurrences themselves. The verbal and physical harassment of children and adolescents caused by the perception of non-heteronormative behavior has likely existed for centuries, certainly long before the gay liberation movements of the 1970s or the onslaught of AIDS in the 1980s. Yet there has been a significant increase in national attention on the issue in the last fifteen years, the initial impetus perhaps stemming from a series of occurrences that might seem only casually related, including the 1998 homicide of Matthew Shepard and the 1999 Columbine High School massacre, both of which occurred within seven months of each other and sparked public debate on hate crimes, teen violence, and bullying. In the ten years that followed Columbine, many public schools initiated bullying and violence prevention programs and increased access to mental health services (Crepeau-Hobson, Filaccio, and Gottfried). But despite these initiatives, the specific
needs of LGBTQ and LGBT-perceived youth were not addressed with the substantial efforts required. But in 2010, an unfortunate series of suicides, related only by their connection to LGBTQ-bullying, occurred within thirty days of each other at different locations across the nation. The fact that these incidents occurred within such a small window of time helped to draw public attention to the issue and inspired a new national campaign, this time led by the LGBTQ community and directed specifically at LGBTQ and LGBT-perceived youth.

**Theoretical Framework: LGBTQ Community Responds**

In September 2010, the same month thirteen-year-old Seth Walsh hanged himself from a tree in Tehachapi, California, eight other children and young adults also took their own lives due to anti-gay bullying in different towns throughout the United States. On September 9th, in Indiana, fifteen-year-old Billy Lucas hanged himself from the rafters of his family’s barn after being tormented by bullies. He had never come out as being gay, but friends reported that for years he was called a “fag” by his schoolmates, one of whom suggested that he kill himself. He had told his school’s administration about the harassment he was receiving but they did nothing (McKinley). Openly gay seventeen-year-old Cody Barker, who was in the initial stages of forming a gay-straight alliance at his school, took his own life on September 13th (LGBTQ Nation). Harrison Chase Brown died suddenly on September 25th, and although few details were made public, his friends suggested that he took his own life due to LGBTQ bullying (Tropiano 46; Nash). Fourteen-year-old Caleb Nolt took his own life on September 20, after being bullied for his manner of dress (Burgess). In Texas, Asher Brown shot himself in the head after being harassed with homophobic slurs, mock sexual gestures, and ridiculing remarks regarding his religious beliefs from his eighth-grade peers, especially in his physical education
class. He died on September 23rd. Asher had told his parents he was gay that morning (Nash; McKinley). Six days later, in Rhode Island, openly gay nineteen-year-old Raymond Chase hanged himself in his dorm room. He was a sophomore studying culinary arts at Johnson & Wales University (Howorth; Wright). On the same day, in Massachusetts, seventeen-year-old Felix Sacco jumped from an overpass into oncoming traffic. Local police ruled his death a suicide. Sacco had posted on Facebook that he was sick of the torment he was receiving from students at his high school, who he called, "obnoxious people who throw stuff at me and pick on me because I'm quiet" (qtd. in Gaffney).

Perhaps the most shocking and well known of these September 2010 suicides was that of eighteen-year-old Tyler Clementi who threw himself off the George Washington bridge after his roommate and another student at Rutgers University, where Tyler was a freshman, secretly videotaped him having sexual relations with a man in his dorm room and then broadcast the video on the internet (McKinley). The incidents surrounding Tyler’s suicide will be examined in depth in Chapter Four.

On September 23rd, author and activist Dan Savage, having been dismayed and outraged after reading about the death of Billy Lucas, decided to add an addendum at the end of his syndicated weekly sex and relationship advice column, Savage Love. After answering his several reader’s questions, Savage posted a commentary about Billy, the rash of suicides, and LGBTQ bullying in general, including an account of his own childhood encounters with bullies. He entitled that particular week’s column “Give ‘Em Hope,” a reference to a quote by Harvey Milk, the first openly gay person elected to public office and who was assassinated after winning a seat on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in 1978. In the column, Savage wrote:
I wish I could have talked to this kid for five minutes. I wish I could have told Billy that it gets better. I wish I could have told him that, however bad things were, however isolated and alone he was, it gets better. But gay adults aren't allowed to talk to these kids. Schools and churches don't bring us in to talk to teenagers who are being bullied. (Savage)

After receiving tremendous response to the column, it occurred to Savage that, in this age of social media, he no longer needed permission from parents or an invitation from schools to communicate with gay youth. He and his husband, Terry Miller, created a video for YouTube in which they addressed the dilemma of gay adults not being able to speak with LGBTQ kids in crisis. The video also encouraged other LGBTQ adults to post their own experiences reflecting on how their life circumstances had greatly improved after high school and college. Savage called the campaign the “It Gets Better Project” with the goal of collecting a hundred videos overall. They achieved this goal within just the first three days and by the end of the week over two hundred videos had been posted. The project’s YouTube channel reached the maximum allowed 650 videos a week later, and eventually the project moved to its own website. Word of the campaign spread and soon celebrities, led by Ellen DeGeneres, were uploading their own videos. After a month, Savage and Miller received a call from The White House informing them that President Barack Obama’s video had just been posted. As of December 2016, there were over 50,000 entries that have received more than 50 million views (Hartlaub; Savage and Miller 1–8). The video campaign was followed by the publication of a collection of over a hundred essays written by DeGeneres, Obama, Hillary Clinton, David Sedaris, Michael Cunningham, and many others entitled “It Gets Better: Coming Out, Overcoming Bullying, and Creating a Life Worth Living,” edited by Savage and Miller. The “It Gets Better Project” has grown in scope and
now operates as a 501(c)(3) charitable organization and has inspired similar programs around the globe ("It Gets Better Project"; Savage and Miller vii–x).

**Theoretical Framework: National Atmosphere**

While September 2010, later referred to by Savage as “that terrible September” (Savage and Miller 3), was unusual in the number of publicized cases, the reality is that bullying as a phenomenon has existed for centuries. In the mid-eighties, playwrights like Hoffman and Kushner were responding to a mounting epidemic that had only just begun to affect their community in the last few years and was previously unheard of. The onslaught of AIDS was something new and the reluctance of the media to cover it had forced the desperate gay community to resort to using the one medium with which they had established an affirmative and interdependent relationship: the stage. The AIDS plays filled a void for the gay community, whose particular issues had long been eschewed by the press. The “terrible September” had presented a new set of circumstances, and in the decade or so that had passed since the end of the “AIDS play” era, nationwide efforts to establish civil rights, such as ending DADT and legalizing same-sex marriage in every state, had not only been met with success but had also helped to put a spotlight on LGBTQ issues overall, leading not only to a significant increase in press coverage, but active participation by gay and lesbian journalists, reporters, editors and commentators in the nation’s news media. Furthermore, sociopolitical issues were not the only aspects of the LGBTQ population that had impacted the national consciousness. The representation of gay and lesbians in other medium, such as film and television, had a strong influence on how Americans viewed a community which many had heretofore been unfamiliar with.
Ellen DeGeneres’ coming out as gay on the cover of *Time* magazine (Carbone) was arranged to coincide with the coming out of the character she played on the television situation-comedy, *Ellen* in April 1997. A year later, *Will & Grace* premiered on NBC and became one of the network’s highest ranked situation-comedies according to the Neilson ratings, and had the effect of, “making gays more familiar and less the ‘Other’ to a heterosexual audience,” as Evan Cooper, sociology professor at Ithaca College pointed out in his thesis on the sitcom (Cooper 531). The result of having openly gay characters prominently featured on a prime-time television series, particularly one that would eventually run in syndication at all hours of the day, was to provide surrogate “gay friends” to those who had previously known few or no openly homosexual people. As Vice President Joe Biden pointed out, while responding to a question about whether the country was ready for same-sex marriage in 2012, “I think *Will & Grace* probably did more to educate the American public than almost anything anybody has ever done so far” (Eldridge). ABC’s *Modern Family* (2009 - ) continues to bring gay characters into the living rooms of millions of Americans with its portrayal of a gay male couple who are seen facing the same domestic dilemmas – raising children, planning vacations, celebrating holidays - as their straight counterparts on the program. When openly gay producer Ryan Murphy first launched Fox’s hit series *Glee* (2009 – 2015), he wanted to explore gay issues on the show, but only after the program had established itself as a general audience vehicle. “I grew up in Indiana behind a cornfield and a church, and for me the only person I knew who was gay was Paul Lynde,” Murphy recalled, “So with *Glee* I wanted to write about something personal, something about gay characters, something about creating your own kind of family no matter who you are or where you live” (qtd. in Peters). Although the first season, which
premiered in 2009, featured only one openly gay character, by the series finale, six years later, the show featured dozens of LGBTQ characters and entire episodes were focused on issues like gay marriage, coming out, bullying, transgender students, gender transitioning, internal homophobia, and gay bashing. In 2016, there are now dozens of openly LGBTQ characters on television. The film industry has also produced more major motion pictures surrounding gay issues, such as *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), and *Milk* (2008), and continues to increase gay representation on the screen. The effect of these portrayals on the heavily media-dependent American populace has ignited a large cultural shift toward inclusion and equal rights for LGBTQ persons.

The events of that “terrible September” occurred in a strikingly different sociopolitical atmosphere for gay and lesbian playwrights than either the onslaught of AIDS or the movement toward civil rights and self-acceptance. The “identity plays” of the sixties and seventies, and the “AIDS plays” of the eighties and nineties were theatrical reactions to situations for which there seemed few other modes of expression at times when sparse attention was paid to LGBTQ issues by the national media or the general population.

**Theoretical Framework: LGBTQ Playwrights Respond**

How then would LGBTQ playwrights respond to this new national focus on bullying and the events of September 2010? Would this new awareness of a phenomenon that has existed since time immemorial ignite a new thematic era in LGBTQ theatre, perhaps eventually referred to as the “bullying plays” era? Would the high likelihood that at least some of these playwrights had experienced bullying firsthand help to propel this movement? Or would there
be no common and unified response to this bullying epidemic, since other entities, such as the
“It Gets Better Project” had already done much to draw attention to the issue?

At first glance, the latter seems true: there seems little evidence that bullying and/or teen suicide would be the next theme explored by gay and lesbian playwrights en mass. But this is only because of where our first glance landed. The geographical center from which emerged both the “identity plays” and the “AIDS plays” was New York City. [The author of this investigation is from New York City and is therefore subject to the same biased geocentric blind-sidedness that is characteristic of native New Yorkers.] There is an unfortunate and misled notion amongst many in the American theatrical community, including those who study theatre from an academic perspective, that Manhattan represents the pinnacle of achievement for a theatrical work in the United States and the measurement of ultimate theatrical accomplishment. Often the success of new works produced in reputable regional theatre companies, like La Jolla Playhouse or the Denver Center Theatre Company, are measured by whether the production “makes it” to New York. This is not only unfortunate but also imprudent, as a work written for the stage might have its strongest and most beneficial impact on audiences who cannot afford the $100 or more that Broadway theatres now charge, or are simply unable to travel to Manhattan (Ng). Such is the case with plays about bullying. As will be discussed, indeed, there have been a large number of works written by LGBT identified playwrights that have been written since 2010 that deal in a concentrated manner with bullying and teen suicide, some of which have been inspired directly by one or more of the events of September 2010 (see Chapter Four). As you can imagine, the target audiences for a large segment of these plays are children and adolescents, both those who have been bullied and
need reassurance in a similar vein as the “It Gets Better Project” and those who bully or might be tempted toward bullying behavior in the future, as well as parents, teachers and other pertinent adults (see Chapter Three). The most effective location for these types of plays to be performed and reach their target audiences is not on Broadway stages, but rather in the public schools, colleges and universities, or perhaps as part of the Young Adult programs popping up in established regional theatres like Steppenwolf.

Themes of bullying and teen suicide are being staged with increasing frequency and many of these plays are being written by gay and lesbian identified playwrights. This is evidenced by the recent publication of two different anthologies: The Bully Plays (2012), by Dramatic Publishing, an anthology of 24 short plays each dealing with various types of bullying from a unique perspective written by diverse playwrights, including gay activist Brian Guehring (Habjan iv), and Awkward Stages: Plays About Growing Up Gay (2015) which brings together five full-length plays written by gay male playwrights and edited by Seth Metzger and John Clum, who state that “Continued anti-LGBTQ violence provides a haunting backdrop for the narratives in this book” (Metzger and Clum 5). Beyond these anthologies, there is another remarkable and burgeoning theatrical movement that also suggests that oppression of gay or gay-perceived youth is becoming a reoccurring theme on American stages: the 2012 establishment of the Pride Youth Theatre Alliance (PYTA) which brings together representatives from eight Queer Youth Theatre (QYT) programs from across the U.S. and Canada. According to its website, one of the core values of the Pride Youth Alliance is, “dismantling oppression based on race, gender, age, and sexual orientation to achieve justice for intersectional queer identities” (Meacham). PYTA’s 2016 conference included sessions on trauma-informed theatre
making and youth-devised script development. Many of the theatrical pieces written for QYTs deal with the personal experiences of LGBTQ youth, of which bullying is an unfortunate part (Pic).

Across the country, theatre companies interested in exploring gay-related themes have turned their attention to issues surrounding school bullying. Some of these groups have responded to the issue through nontraditional means including applied, interactive, and devised theatre projects that often tour schools and youth organizations. The issue is also being addressed through traditional text-based narrative forms, and themes of gay bullying are popping up in the works of a variety of playwrights whose plays are being produced by both gay-focused and general-purpose companies as well as colleges, middle schools, high schools, and grade schools. These plays are addressing the issues of bullying and teen suicide from a variety of unique and creative perspectives. An in-depth look at a cross-section of these plays by playwrights whose works are being actively produced across the country will shed some insight into the approaches used to tackle these challenging and sensitive issues.

Additional Review of Literature

The history of gay drama depicted previously was developed by looking at works written for the American stage through the lens of two primary concerns: how have gay, lesbian, and other non-heteronormative people been represented on the American stage, and how do gay and lesbian playwrights represent themselves and address their interests? The first concern is focused primarily within the confines of the early twentieth century, or what the major scholars of gay theatre term Pre-Stonewall, in reference to the riots of June 1969 at the Stonewall Inn, often cited as the event that propelled the modern gay liberation movement into existence.
(Clum, *Acting Gay* xii–xiii; Rosenberg). Representation is examined in lieu of any political, social, or emotional concerns since the larger society was generally not permissive of these issues being addressed on the public stage. In this Pre-Stonewall period, several patterns regarding the representation of homosexuality can be seen. Specifically, in the years before 1934, deviant sexuality was merely alluded to or presented as comic tropes dependent on gender-variant behavior, such as camp. Beginning in 1934, characters who signify as homosexual or are implied to be homosexual, begin to appear, but they are usually met with some form of retribution for their behavior, most often at their own hand. John Clum writes that, “Such a work may seem to capitulate to the prejudices of its audience but actually reflects the internalized homophobia of the playwright” (Clum, *Acting Gay* xiii). While this may be true, that internalized homophobia is undoubtedly the result of living in a heterosexist society.

In the Post-Stonewall period of gay drama, the number of works produced by openly gay or lesbian playwrights became numerous enough to recognize common themes, and many plays can be grouped within the categories of the “Identity plays,” which were written primarily in the late sixties through early eighties, and the “AIDS plays” of the eighties and nineties. The classification of these themes may seem self-evident, but is heavily dependent on established scholarship by those researchers in the field of gay theatre, primarily John Clum, Alan Sinfield, and Don Shewey.

Clum conducted the first major study of homosexuality in modern English and American plays, providing an in-depth look at the central works in the genre, published as *Acting Gay* (1992). Clum emphasizes the importance of theatre in gay culture, and examines the paradox of expression and “closetedness” in those works by gay playwrights in the early twentieth century.
Clum established the categories of Pre and Post-Stonewall gay drama adapted by successive gay-theatre historians. In *Still Acting Gay* (2000), Clum revises and expands his study while continuing to look at the ways gay male playwrights have influenced mainstream theatre. He analyzes the thematic transition from plays about living in the closet through plays dealing with AIDS. In *Something for the Boys* (1999), Clum looks at musical theatre from a gay, and perhaps somewhat more whimsical, perspective, while exploring the possible reasons for the attraction gay men have historically demonstrated for the form. Clum is a Professor Emeritus of Theater Studies at Duke University.

Alan Sinfield co-founded the Lesbian and Gay studies program, entitled “Sexual Dissidence and Cultural Change,” in 1990 at the University of Sussex, where he is a professor. In his influential 1994 work, *Cultural Politics – Queer Reading*, he promotes the examination of ethnic, gender, and culture paradigms in literary analysis (Sinfield, *Cultural Politics - Queer Reading* back cover). The work was revised in 2005 to include an introduction that is somewhat critical of recent developments in queer theory. *Out on Stage: Lesbian and Gay Theater in the Twentieth Century* (1999), looks at the influence gay culture has had on theatre and the stage’s use as a tool for exploration of gender and sexuality. Unlike Clum, Sinfield explores both lesbian and gay male contributions to the theatre.

Don Shewey has published extensively on what he has termed “Out Theatre”, he is a theatre writer for *The New York Times*, and is the editor of *Out Front: Contemporary Gay and Lesbian Plays* (1988). In his essays, especially “Be True to Yearning,” Shewey captures the history behind the emergence of gay and lesbian theatre in New York from a frontline perspective not seen in Clum or Sinfield.
Clum, Sinfield, and Shewey laid the foundation for establishing gay and lesbian theatre as a branch of theatre worthy of scholarly investigation and critical analysis leading to a vast collection of mounting scholarship by Sue-Ellen Case, James Fisher, David Román, and many others. Within this mound of research, the thematic categories of the “Identity plays” and “AIDS plays” can be recognized (along with a multitude of other connections not relevant to this dissertation).

This research seeks to build on the work of these historians and scholars by exploring how a new generation of American lesbian and gay playwrights are reacting to the epidemic of bullying and teen suicide, particularly after the events of September 2010. It asks the question: is bullying becoming a common theme or plot point in the post-AIDS era of gay theatre-making? What approaches and techniques are being used by these playwrights in their attempt to affect change? And finally, what do these plays seek to accomplish in terms of the questions raised and the solutions presented, particularly those questions that remain unasked in the mainstream media?
Chapter Two
Methodology and Terminology

Methodology: Selection of Plays

This investigation looks at the ways in which young American LGBTQ identified playwrights have responded to bullying and teen suicide, particularly after the tragic events of September 2010. Of specific interest is the response of these playwrights as expressed through their work, although interviews have been collected or conducted with each playwright, and their viewpoints, techniques, and motivations for creating the plays will also be examined to add further insight.

Because the rationale behind this inquiry was derived within an historical context - in which we are comparing current trends with those observed in the past - and not a socio-political or cultural one, the works to be examined here must meet the specific criteria which would allow us to draw the historic parallels necessary to establish a pattern. The communal focus on specific issues by American gay and lesbian playwrights of the past allowed us to define the two thematic movements of the “Identity plays” of the sixties, seventies and early eighties, and the “AIDS plays” of the late eighties and nineties.

There have, of course, been plays dealing with identity and pride written during the same time periods by LGBTQ authors who were not American. For example, the Gay Sweatshop, Britain’s first openly gay professional theatre, was formed in London in 1974 with a remarkably similar style and objective as Caffe Cino. Their manifesto was, “to counteract the prevailing perception in mainstream theatre of what homosexuals were like, therefore
providing a more realistic image for the public and to increase the general awareness of the oppression of sexuality, both gay and straight, the impact it has on people’s lives and the society that reinforces it” (Callow; Freeman; “Gay Sweatshop”). Certainly, plays about AIDS have been written by LGBTQ writers from all over the world as well. But the two distinctive trends seen on the American stage are united by specific characteristics that developed primarily in response to cultural and political trends that occurred in the United States.

Since this research seeks to investigate the existence of a possible new thematic trend and how it is being manifested, the demographic parameters of the playwrights in question must match, at least to a reasonable degree, those of the playwrights who initiated the previous trends. This exploration is not interested in works simply because they focus on bullying, or even specifically the physical, verbal and/or psychological intimidation of gay or gay-identified youth. Instead, this study will look at playwrights who fall into a specific demographic that is still quite diverse unto itself. This inquiry will specifically analyze plays that have been written after September 2010 by American playwrights who have self-identified as being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. The plays must have a significant focus on the issue of bullying and/or teen suicide caused by bullying. The characters in these plays, whether seen or unseen on stage, who are or have been victims of bullying, need not identify as LGBTQ. To investigate and analyze the response of these LGBTQ-identified playwrights to bullying and the epidemic of LGBTQ suicides due to bullying, it is not necessary to qualify the sexual identities of the characters they created or any aspect of the composition of these works. It is only required that the plays are clearly a response to bullying and/or teen suicide due to bullying.
Theatre is being used in remarkable ways to address bullying and teen violence not only through sole-authored plays, but also through such means as applied, interactive and devised theatre. Many of the groups working in these genres, such as the Colorado Shakespeare Festival’s Shakespeare & Violence Prevention program, have made a wonderful impact on the children and adolescents they have performed for and worked with. However, because this enquiry stems from an historic context, this investigation will look primarily at traditional text-based plays, specifically, narrative driven dramatic works written for the stage primarily by a sole author.

The criteria for inclusion in this exploration is work written for the stage after September 2010 that have a strong focus on bullying and/or teen suicide caused by bullying that were written by American playwrights who have self-identified as being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. Further, because this is an exploration of national and influential trends, ideally the particular playwrights whose works are selected would have already demonstrated some quantity of achievement at the national level. Recognition through grants or awards by the MacArthur Foundation, The Pulitzer Organization, GLAAD (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation), and other prestigious organizations were taken into consideration in helping to predict the playwright’s influence on the future of the national theatre.

If the playwright’s work has been produced, particularly by a professional regional theatre company with an established reputation for quality productions, this would indicate some amount of vetting through a literary management or new play development department by personnel with experience in selecting works with strong potential. In addition, plays that
have been given fully staged productions by established companies and have elicited reviews from local or national critics can then be used in lieu of witnessing the live performance of the work. It is also possible, as is the case with one of the playwrights selected for this investigation, that the work has already received multiple productions outside of the realm of professional theatres on the stages of schools and universities, and has achieved success as demonstrated by the high demand for production rights.

After a review of over fifty works that met all or most of these criteria, six plays were chosen for analysis, comparison, and reflection in hopes of gaining insight into the overall reaction of LGBTQ playwrights to the bullying epidemic. To ignite a livelier discussion through comparison, the works will be explored in pairs. These pairings are primarily based on the intended audience for the works, as well as the age of the primary characters.

Chapter Three will explore the “Connection plays” – works written primarily for young audiences with a focus on middle and high school age characters who are currently experiencing physical or verbal bullying. *The Misfits* (2011), adapted for the stage by Brian Guehring from the novel by James Howe, is a funny and moving account of four seventh-grade friends who have been the victims of nick-names and taunts for most of their lives and decide that they aren’t going to take it anymore. Despite their unpopularity, they resolve to run for student body and form their own political party, whose slogan is, “sticks and stones can break our bones, but names will break our spirit” (Guehring, “The Misfits” 41). Brian Guehring is the Playwright in Residence at the Omaha Theater Company, one of the nation’s largest professional theatres for young people. He is the winner of two American Alliance for Theater and Education Unpublished Play Project Awards and his play, *The Bully Show*, was selected for
the 2002 New Visions/New Voices new play development workshop at the Kennedy Center. He is the co-founder of Pride Players, a teen theatre troupe that uses improvisation to create skits, songs, poems, monologues, and scenes about the experiences of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer and straight allied teens in Omaha (Guehring, “The Misfits” 2–3). James Howe is the author of more than eighty books for children and young adults, including the popular Bunnicula series (1979 – 2006), and the Misfits series (2001 – 2014). After two marriages to women, Howe came out as gay at the age of 51 and soon after married Mark Davis. He worked with Guehring on the stage adaptation of The Misfits, offering ideas and comments on each draft (Scholl; Guehring, “The Misfits” 2–3).

*fnl: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life* (2012), by Sarah Gubbins, tells the story of Jo, a high school junior and graphic artist with astounding basketball skills. Jo uses the inspiration she finds in the novel The Heart is a Lonely Hunter to help her cope with both homophobic name-calling and a horrific physical attack. Sarah Gubbins was a resident playwright at Chicago Dramatists and an Artistic Associate at About Face Theatre. She has a long-standing relationship with the Steppenwolf Theatre Company, where *fnl: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life* premiered as part of their Young Adult series. Gubbins is the recipient of the Joseph Jefferson Award and the Edgerton Foundation New American Play Prize. Her plays have also been staged at the Public Theatre, the New York Theatre Workshop, and the Goodman Theatre. She is currently working with producer Jill Soloway (*Transparent, Six Feet Under*) on a new series for Amazon entitled I Love Dick (Felsenthal; Gubbins, “Sarah Gubbins”).

Chapter Four will examine the “Exploration plays”: two plays intended for mixed audiences (adults and youth) that focus on high school and college age characters dealing with
verbal and psychological intimidation: *Choir Boy* (2013), by Tarell Alvin McCraney, is a coming-of-age story that takes place at an elite school for African-American boys where the ineluctably gay Pharus Jonathan Young, a junior and the lead singer of the school’s famous choir, comes into conflict with the headmaster of the school when he is the victim of anti-gay and racial heckling during a choir performance in front of the student body. McCraney is a 2013 recipient of the MacArthur Genius Award and is best known for his Brother/Sister Plays trilogy, the first of which premiered simultaneously at The Public Theatre in New York and the Young Vic in London before being performed at regional theatres across the United States (Dolen). In 2007, he received the Cole Porter Playwriting Award at his graduation from the Yale School of Drama’s Playwriting Program. He is a member of the Steppenwolf Theatre Ensemble and was the Warwick International playwright in residence at the Royal Shakespeare Festival in 2008. (Blankenship; “Choir Boy Study Guide” 3–4). In 2016, *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue*, a drama school project that was drawn from McCraney’s recollections of growing up in Miami’s poor Liberty City neighborhood, became the basis for the film *Moonlight*, directed by Barry Jenkins (Allen) and McCraney was given an Academy Award for his screenplay. That same year he was appointed chair of Yale School of Drama’s Playwriting Program and succeeded Paula Vogel as the playwright in residence at Yale Repertory Theatre (Barone).

*Teddy Ferrara* (2013), by Christopher Shinn, is a dramatization of the events surrounding the suicide of Tyler Clementi in September 2010. While both the background and titular character in *Teddy Ferrara* are based on an intensive investigation into the real-life series of events that occurred at Rutgers University, the play is presented primarily from the viewpoint of the completely fictional Gabe, a fellow student who befriends Teddy while trying to establish
a supportive community for LBGTQ students at the university. Shinn was a Pulitzer Prize finalist for his wartime drama, *Dying City* (2006), which premiered at London’s Royal Court Theatre and was followed by a Lincoln Center Theater mounting in early 2007 (Wallenberg). Previous to *Dying City*, Shinn won an Obie Award for his play *Where Do We Live* (2005). He currently teaches playwriting at the New School for Drama in New York (Bacalzo).

The final two plays will be explored in Chapter Five. Since both works were written primarily for adult audiences and focus on adult characters reflecting on bullying incidents in their past, they are referred to in this study as the “Reflection plays.” In *after all the terrible things I do the terrible things I do* (2015), by A. Rey Pamatmat, a young gay man returns to his small Midwestern hometown after completing his English degree and finds a job at a local bookstore where he develops a camaraderie with the Filipina proprietor in which they discuss the novel he is writing, the losses she has experienced, and the guilt they both have over cruel behavior in their pasts. [This investigation will examine many aspects of this play, including the plot which contains several unexpected twists and revelations. Reading this analysis before reading or attending the play will no doubt spoil the surprises that the playwright has carefully constructed.] The play premiered at the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre and was quickly followed by a production at The Huntington Theatre in Boston (Fitzmaurice). Like McCraney, Pamatmat is also a graduate of Yale School of Drama’s Playwriting program. He is the recipient of a Playwright of New York (PoNY) Fellowship, Princeton’s Hodder Fellowship, a Princess Grace Award for Playwriting, and a Truman Capote Literary Fellowship. Pamatmat is Co-Director of the Ma-Yi Writer’s Lab and teaches playwriting at Primary Stages’ Einhorn School of the Performing Arts (Pamatmat, “Biography”; Evans).
The primary dilemma in *From White Plains* (2012), revolves around a screenwriter’s journey toward forgiveness. Having publically accused a former classmate of causing the suicide of his best friend in high school, Dennis’ obsession with revenge grows as the accused, Ethan, begins to examine the actions of his younger self. *From White Plains*, written by Michael Perlman with contributions from the original cast of the Fault Line Theatre Company’s production, premiered at the Pershing Square Signature Center in New York in January 2013, following a workshop production six months earlier at Teatro LATEA. *From White Plains* is the recipient of a 2013 GLAAD Media Award. Perlman is an Artistic Associate with both Fiasco Theater and Fault Line Theatre companies in New York. He holds a BA and MFA from Brown University, where he studied under Paula Vogel and Richard Waterhouse (Eger; Perlman, “Michael Perlman - Bio”).

**Methodology: Step One - Analysis**

Script-analysis is the first step in exploring each of the works and will aid in establishing a common lens through which our six selections will be examine.

Before exploring the play’s connections to bullying and teen suicide, an in-depth analysis will enable those unacquainted with the scripts to familiarize themselves with the plot, characters, and themes, particularly since two of the selections will not be published and available to the public until after the submission of this dissertation.

There exists a multitude of ways to analyze a play, but this investigation is ultimately concerned with examining the structure of these dramatic works and the playwrights’ specific motivations for selecting that approach. The method of dramatic analysis developed by David Ball helps to reveal the basic structure of a well-written play while uncovering its myriad
complexities. Perhaps the strongest asset of Ball’s method, which he carefully lays out in his book, *Backwards and Forwards: A Technical Manual for Reading Plays*, is its specificity in looking at plays as potential stage productions. As influential stage director and former Artistic Director of Minneapolis’s Guthrie Theatre, Michael Langham, points out in his introduction to Ball’s method, “The usefulness of *Backwards and Forwards* lies in the fact that it reveals a script not only as literature, but as raw material for theatrical production – sometimes with structural characteristics that make it comparable to a musical score” (Ball vii–viii). *Backwards and Forwards* has become a standard script-analysis text for universities and theatre conservatories across the country. David Ball served as Artistic Director for both Pittsburgh’s Metro Theater and South Carolina’s Duke Stage Company, and as dramaturg at the Guthrie Theater. He has adapted *The Miser*, *Tartuffe*, and other works for Theatre de la Jeune Lune. He was the Director of Duke University’s Drama department and a Professor of acting, directing, playwriting and dramaturgy at Carnegie Mellon University (“David Ball”).

The method of analysis used here will be an adaptation of Ball’s approach. Each play will be examined in an eight-step analytical process by defining the following:

1. Description of the primary characters, including those traits, qualities and features that distinguish one character from another (Ball 60).

2. The play’s initial stasis. All plays begin by introducing us to a world that is in stasis or at least an indication of what that stasis was.

3. The intrusion that shatters that stasis. “*For a play to begin to play, there must be an intrusion* ... In every play something or someone comes along to shatter stasis”(Ball 20).
4. A comparison of the world in action versus the world in stasis. This step will also reveal key exposition which will ideally propel (not merely explain) the present action (Ball 42).

5. How stasis is reestablished. Dramatic works all endeavor to reestablish stasis, even if the stasis at the end of the play is quite different from the stasis that was defined in the beginning. Stasis is achieved when the major forces of the conflict either succeed or no longer try. “Remember the steps: stasis, intrusion, and the battle for new stasis initiated by intrusion” (Ball 22).

6. The “shape” of the play, a summary of the actions. Every play is a series of actions, which are the primary building blocks of drama. Actions are defined as an event that causes or leads to a subsequent event or events. Ball refers to the initial event as the action’s trigger and the second event as its heap. The connection between the two is what the analysis looking to reveal. The actions will be looked at in reverse order, since, as Ball points out, “Only when we look at events in reverse order can we see, with certainty, how the dominos fell, which fell against which … Going backward exposes that which is required”(Ball 15). Although all the actions have been examined for each play, only the major or relevant actions will be discussed in this report, in which the “shape” of the play is illustrated.

7. Use of dialogue. Playwrights try to reflect recognizable human behavior by the way their characters speak. Characters, like all human beings, talk to get what they are after. Ball asserts that the way in which they talk must always support the pretense of impersonation, and therefore must be recognizable even if it is heightened, lowered or fragmented (Ball 27).
8. The primary characters’ obstacles and motivations: the forces standing in the way of the characters getting what they want and restoring stasis creates the dramatic conflict. Ball writes that, “A character’s want is opposed by some hindrance – by some obstacle. A character talks to maneuver another character or characters in such a way that the obstacle to the want is removed. To understand a line of dialogue you must know what the speaker wants and how the speaker intends the words spoken to overcome the obstacle to what is wanted” [Emphasis in the original] (Ball 31).

Beginning our exploration of each of these six works by analyzing them with this approach in mind should establish a solid foundation from which our discussion on ways in which the play deals with bullying can then be initiated.

Methodology: Step Two – Comparison with Federal Initiatives on Bullying

There are several ways to examine how each of the six dramatic works deal with bullying. For this investigation, the plays will be assessed through the lens of the primary guidelines recommended by the United States Federal Government to address bullying and violence prevention in schools. Current guidelines are the result of a federal effort that spans nine separate government departments, including the Department of Education and the Department of Justice, that came together under the leadership of Kevin Jennings, Assistant Deputy Secretary for the Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, and Deborah Temkin, the Research and Policy Coordinator for Bullying Prevention Initiatives. Jennings and Temkin, who both work through the Education Department, were tasked with planning the first Federal Partners in Bullying Prevention Summit in the summer 2010, which launched a multitude of
federal research projects on bullying in conjunction with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The Federal Partners in Bullying Prevention is an interagency effort led by the Department of Education that works to coordinate policy, research, and communication on bullying topics. The Federal Partners include representatives from the U.S. Departments of Agriculture, Defense, Education, Health and Human Services, the Interior, and Justice, as well as the Federal Trade Commission, and the White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. After the string of suicides caused by gay-related bullying that following September, Jennings and Temkin were commissioned by the Obama Administration to organize the first White House Conference on Bullying Prevention and to design and launch the government's central repository on bullying prevention, StopBullying.gov (Chandler; “Evaluation Reports: Policy and Program Studies Services”).

StopBullying.gov is governed by the Department of Education (ED), the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and the Department of Justice. Three specific branches of the HHS are primarily responsible for its particular contribution: The CDC, the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The web-based repository coordinates closely with the Federal Partners in Bullying Prevention Steering Committee, which conducts its annual summit that brings together the latest research and coordinates the efforts made within each individual department (McCallion and Feder ii).

The CDC led the effort to develop a consensus definition of bullying to be used throughout the field of school bullying research (McCallion and Feder 1). This definition addressed issues various departments and outside groups had with the previous working
definition, particularly by stating that a single incident could meet the designation, whereas continued multiple incidences were required earlier. As stated in their 2014 document, entitled *Bullying Surveillance Among Youth: Uniform Definitions and Recommended Data Elements*, the CDC defines bullying among youth as, “any unwanted aggressive behavior(s) by another youth or group of youths who are not siblings or current dating partners that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated. Bullying may inflict harm or distress on the targeted youth including physical, psychological, social, or educational harm” (Gladden et al. 7). The CDC categorizes bullying into two modes, direct and indirect. Direct bullying is any aggressive behavior that occurs in the presence of the targeted victim, such as leveling harmful written or verbal communication at the youth or making unwanted aggressive physical contact, such as pushing the victim. Indirect bullying occurs when aggressive behaviors are targeted outside of the direct presence of the victim and include spreading false and/or harmful rumors or communicating harmful rumors electronically. The specification of the direct and indirect modes is the result of the growing trend of cyberbullying. Further, the CDC divides bullying into four types: physical bullying is the use of force by the perpetrator against the targeted youth, such as pushing, hitting, kicking, punching, tripping, and spitting on the victim; verbal bullying is any oral or written communication by the perpetrator against the targeted youth that causes him or her harm and includes taunting, name-calling, threatening, or offensive written or verbal statements, inappropriate sexual comments, and hand gestures; relational bullying is action taken by the perpetrator designed to specifically harm the reputation and relationships of the targeted youth, and includes efforts to isolate the targeted youth by ignoring or keeping him or her from
interacting with their peers through such means as spreading false and/or harmful rumors, publicly writing derogatory comments, or posting embarrassing images in a physical or electronic space without the target youth’s permission or knowledge; and, lastly, property damage or theft of the target youth’s property by the perpetrator to cause harm, including deleting personal electronic information (Gladden et al. 7–8).

The ways in which bullying and/or teen suicide caused by bullying are dramatized in each of the six plays explored in this study will be compared to current federal guidelines as described in two primary resources: the Department of Education’s *Guiding Principles: A Resource Guide for Improving School Climate and Discipline* and StopBullying.gov, the repository website developed in response to the White House Conference on Bullying Prevention through a coordinated effort by the Department of Education and the Justice Department, and managed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

*Guiding Principles: A Resource Guide for Improving School Climate and Discipline* was issued by the Department of Education in January 2014, and organizes their recommended guidelines into three basic principles. The first guiding principle focuses on using evidence-based strategies to create a positive school climate and encourages the use of prevention and intervention activities and services. The second guiding principle recommends that schools lay out clear, appropriate, and consistent expectations of student behavior while boosting the collaborative involvement of families, students, and school personnel. The third principle encourages the training of personnel to be fair and equitable to students, with particular attention paid to the impact on students of color, students with disabilities, or at-risk students (U.S. Department of Education 5–18).
The Federal government’s information repository, StopBullying.gov, is a comprehensive resource on bullying that organizes the research and recommendations of the nine government agencies that comprise the Federal Partners in Bullying Prevention into three primary categories: risk, prevention, and response. The documentation dealing with risk describes the warning signs, factors, and the effects of bullying on youth and provides in-depth guidelines for specific at-risk groups, including LGBTQ youth, youth with disabilities, racial and ethnic minorities, and those at-risk due to their religion or faith. The prevention unit looks at school climate, community involvement, and training. The response portion offers guidelines for dealing with specific incidences of bullying, including ways to support those youth involved in the incident, and encourage appropriate positive reactions from bystanders (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, “StopBullying.gov”).

Methodology: Step Three – Tackling the Relevant Issues In-Depth

Each chapter will conclude by looking in-depth at two specific topics involving bullying that have been addressed by the content of one or both plays analyzed in the chapter. The topic may also be relevant to one or more of the plays in previous or subsequent chapters.

Chapter Three will look at the extraordinary success of the “No Name-Calling Week” campaign by GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network) that has been sponsored annually by Simon and Schuster Publishing since 2004, and was inspired by James Howe’s novel The Misfits, which Brian Guehring adapted for the stage. Gender differences in bullying and teen suicide will also be explored in regard to the dynamic protagonist of Sarah Gubbins’ *fml: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life*. 
The special circumstances surrounding race and LGBTQ bullying will be examined in Chapter Four in connection with both Tarell Alvin McCraney’s Choir Boy and A. Rey Pamatmat’s after all the terrible things I do the terrible things I do, both of which deal with racial issues from two very different perspectives. This chapter will conclude by using examples from both Christopher Shinn’s play Teddy Ferrara and the real-life suicide of Tyler Clementi that inspired it, to help illustrate some of the new theories of empathy and bullying that are being studied in the field of psychology.

Finally, Chapter Five will delve into the escalating phenomenon of cyberbully and the presence of technology in several of the dramatic works being surveyed, including fml: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life, Teddy Ferrara, and particularly, From White Plains.

**Terminology**

This investigation will look at works written for the stage that involve bullying and teen suicide caused by bullying. Since bullying is a term that is commonly used to mean a wide range of different things, particularly in today’s political climate, it is probably useful to define how the term will be used within these pages. As mentioned, the CDC begins its definition of bullying in terms of behavior, specifically aggression, and underscores the existence of a power imbalance, whether it is observed or just perceived (Gladden et al. 7). Aggression and the misuse of power already insinuate the malign nature of bullying and cast the term in its appropriately negative light. Before the CDC was tasked with developing a consensus-based definition, the departments that comprised the Federal Partners in Bullying Prevention had varying definitions, much like the nation itself.
In one highly influential definition of bullying, Tattum and Tattum (1992) wrote: “Bullying is a willful conscious desire to hurt another and put him/her under stress” (qtd. in Rigby 27). Under this definition, no action is required, simply the desire to do harm. But accepting this definition would imply a solution that equates to “stop people from wanting to hurt each other,” a noble sentiment and an impossible feat. It is also an unnecessary mentalist construct. As Rigby correctly points out, behavioral psychologists tend toward a very different definition that focuses on what is done rather than on the intentions or emotional state of the doer. They offer a formulation of bullying that focuses on aggressive behavior, even if that behavior is a non-action, such as purposely ignoring or excluding others (Rigby 29–30).

The technical definition of bullying used by most researchers and educators was first suggested in 1978 by Daniel Olweus in his book, *Aggression in the Schools: Bullies and Whipping Boys*. Olweus wrote that, “A student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students” (Olweus 496). This definition laid the groundwork for the CDC. The Olweus definition raised the issue of the need for repeated incidents in order to be considered bullying, differentiating it from a single act of aggression.

While the Olweus definition removes desire from the definition of bullying, motivation is a crucial element in the development and exploration of characters constructed for the stage. This study will explore the nature of the desire to harm through the in-depth deconstruction of several characters in the plays being analyzed. This is a desire that can spring from a multitude of psychological factors, especially lack of self-worth. In each instance, it is the aggressive behavior that defines the character as a bully. Defining a person (either real or fictional) based
on behavior reveals the transient nature of the label *bully*, which gives no latitude for change. Perhaps you are only a bully when aggressively harming a person observed to have less power, just as you are only a passenger until you get off the train. But the label is assigned, regardless, based on repeated actions (or repeated actions taken in the past).

One reoccurring element in several of the plays is cyberbullying. Relative to other types of bullying, such as those experienced in person in the halls or playgrounds of schools, cyberbullying is a new and growing phenomenon. Cyberbullying occurs when one or more types of technology are used aggressively to harm another individual or group. Just like victims of traditional bullying, youth who experience cyberbullying report higher rates of depression and suicidality than those who are not bullied at all. However, some studies suggest that children experience greater depression from cyberbullying than from any other form of bullying (deLara 105). Cyberbullying is categorized by the CDC as “relational bullying” in that, most often, the action taken by the perpetrator is designed to specifically harm the reputation of the victim through such means as spreading false and/or harmful rumors, publicly writing derogatory comments, or posting embarrassing images in a physical or electronic space without the target youth’s permission or knowledge. Repetition is often even more evident in cyberbullying than in traditional forms. A single transmission of a defaming photo, vilifying message, or embarrassing personal information – either true or made up – may bring about numerous responses from others and quickly blossom into a “viral” situation (Chadwick 3).

Both cyberbullying and traditional forms of bullying deal with an imbalance of power. As Rigby points out, that imbalance might not exist due to exceptional powers on the part of the perpetrator, but rather weakness on the part of the victim (Rigby 33). Power might stem from
the physical strength of either a threatening individual or the combined strength of a group.

Power can also be derived from the social dynamic of any given situation, where an individual who has no more dominance in physical strength than the victim in a one-on-one situation, has the support or – and this is a vital distinction – believes they have the support of the larger community or even the society as whole. This is often the basis for the bullying – either cyber or traditional – that occurs against youth perceived to be LGBTQ. In the case of LGBTQ bullying, there is often a “social power” given to bullies where their actions are often reinforced by the homophobic or transphobic beliefs impressed upon them by the larger culture – from parental biases, church teachings, or laws which specifically allow discrimination against LGBTQ persons (“You are not allowed to marry, but I am”).

Navigating the vast array of acronyms associated with those people who do not identify as cisgender heterosexuals can be somewhat problematic, particularly because inclusivity tends to be highly valued within these groups, and understandably so, given that they have historically been met with exclusion themselves.

LGBTQ, an acronym that will appear quite frequently in this research, stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and then something beginning with the letter Q. The reader can fill in whatever they wish, although the two words that are most commonly inferred are “questioning” and/or “queer.” Sometimes LGBTQQ will be found (usually within a quoted source) in which case the author wished to underscore inclusivity of both the categories. Both terms are important in a study of bullying; “questioning” because it is a process often deeply affected and influenced by the antagonism aimed at members of the LGBTQ community, particularly youth, which delays self-identity. Youth questioning their sexual identity may delay
their journey of self-discovery if they sense it may lead to inclusion in a group that is often victimized.

“Queer” is a strange word. Today, it has several active uses. In his book, *Queer Theories* (2003), Donald E. Hall describes queer as an adjective, a verb, and a noun, which in each case can be defined in terms of “the normative.” Hall feels it is best to think of the adjective “queer” in this way: “it is to abrade classifications, to sit across conventional categories or traverse several ... It means that there is ... no simple slot into which complex behaviors, desires, abilities, and ambitions can be placed” (D. E. Hall 13). It is a rebellion against what Dunn refers to as “The Victorian drive to categorize and classify, to fix individuals and their many social characteristics into schemas of scientific and pseudo-scientific understanding” (Dunn 12). The verb form of queer, Hall tells us, encourages the action of “putting pressure on simplistic notions of identity.” Hall describes the noun perspective on being queer, which is simply one who occupies that lower half of that last hierarchized binary: “To be a woman is to be the lesser version of a man. To be ‘of color’, is to be a lesser version of being ‘white.’ To be an effeminate man it to be a lesser version of a masculine man. To be a homosexual is to be a lesser version of a heterosexual” (D. E. Hall 13–14). In this version, a queer is something that it is preferable not to be. This is the meaning of queer implied when used in name-calling incidents involving youth; the idea that you are “less than.” While exploring plays where name-calling is motivated by perception of LGBTQ characteristics, queer is most often used in this context, as a pejorative meant to degrade. A clear example of this can be found in Moises Kaufman’s documentary play, *The Laramie Project*, where one of the killers says that Matthew Shepard, the boy he killed,
looked, “like a queer. Such a queer dude ... Yeah, like a fag, you know?” (Kaufman, Fondakowski, and Tectonic Theatre Project 90).

Queer theory, a branch of post-structuralist critical theory, challenges the notion that gender is part of the essential self. Sparked by Foucault’s provocative assertions that *homosexuality* is a constructed category of knowledge that grew out of a particular context in the 1870s, and not a discovered category of identity, queer theorists expanded this viewpoint to look at the socially constructed nature of sex and identity (Spargo 17). Queer theory connects the common precepts of feminist theory with those of gay and lesbian studies and is heavily influenced by the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Lee Edelman, and particularly Judith Butler, who has, as gender theorist Riki Wilchins writes, “questioned the traditional categories of identity – by gender, sex, sexual orientation, and race – people use to navigate the traditional liberal narrative. In the process she has reinvented much of feminist theory, becoming one of the founders of what has been named *queer theory*” [Emphasis in the original] (Wilchins 133). Queer theorists encourage looking at literature, history, and social systems through a lens that questions the simplistic notions of identity, particularly sexual identity, and asks us to disturb the value systems that underlie the designations of “normal” and “abnormal” (D. E. Hall 14–15).

But as Alan Sinfield, one of the gay and lesbian scholars whose work inspired this current investigation, points out, queer is more than just a lens. “First, it was a coinage of AIDS activists who seized it from traditional homophobic discourse and brandished it in the face of right-wing opponents,” Sinfield writes, “Also, it was a reproach to lesbians and gay men who had settled too easily for minimal civil rights and ambivalent social acceptance.” This impulse to
chastise your allies into action is understandable. But some of the tenets espoused by those who identify as queer theorists, particularly the idea of living without a socially grounded identity, can sometimes muddy the arguments being made in the quest for civil rights. Sinfield states that, “The more adventurous sexual engagements favored in queer theory tend to involve role-play, much of which depends on stereotypes, however ironically distorted. Declaring all identities to be unpredictable and fluctuating is not conducive to organization. It is difficult to sustain a political movement if your constituency won’t stand still for long enough to be counted” (Sinfield, Cultural Politics - Queer Reading x–xi).

The extended initialism, LGBTQIA, includes Intersex individuals, or those born with reproductive or sexual anatomy that does not seem to fit the typical definitions of male or female; and Allies, those individuals who do not identify with any of the other included categories but wish to support, emotionally or politically, those who do. There are further variations, including the addition of the number 2 (as in LGBT2Q) to indicate inclusion of those recognized as “two-spirited” by some indigenous North Americans, many of whom are fighting to return two-spirited individuals to the place of honor that they once occupied within their tribes (Leland).

The histories of lesbian women and the histories of gay men are different yet intertwined. Traditionally, lesbians and gay men have worked together in situations where they share similar political objectives. But occasionally the connection has reached beyond the political. A defining moment that worked toward the unification of these two groups came during the AIDS crisis, when hundreds of lesbians, who were not themselves falling ill of the disease in great numbers, formed coalitions of volunteers or worked with established
organizations to assist gay men in crisis (Brekke). At other times, the subcultures have demonstrated separate interests. Gay men seem to have been drawn to the arts in greater numbers than either their heterosexual counterparts or lesbians, perhaps because the arts are commonly an arena where there are fewer gender expectations, and societal values such as racism and heterosexism are challenged. The arts also tend to forge spaces where masculinity is devalued and gay males are accepted. As Charles Ludlum, founder of the Ridiculous Theatrical Company, once said in an interview, "Gay people have always found a refuge in the arts, and the Ridiculous Theatre is notable for admitting it. The people in it -- and it is a very sophisticated theatre, culturally -- never dream of hiding anything about themselves that they feel is honest and true and the best part of themselves" (qtd. in Shewey, “Be True to Yearning” 124). Lesbians tend to have a greater association with feminist culture and the efforts to fight against established patriarchal institutions and attitudes, which often still benefit gay men (Faderman 239–241).

The term *gay*, when used alone without being accompanied by *lesbian* in referring to a group of two or more individuals, is meant to be inclusive of homosexual and bisexual people of either gender. The word “gay” first became an underground synonym for homosexual in the early twentieth century and was meant to encompass lesbians, bisexuals, people who would later be referred to as transgendered, and men who are attracted to men. It remains the most widely used umbrella term for this diverse community (Faderman xix–xx). It is sometimes used as a substitute for the phrase *lesbians and gay men*, for example in “gay rights.” When referring to multiple individuals who identify as homosexual or bisexual comprised all of one gender, the
terms *lesbians* or *gay men* may be used. Throughout these pages, the terms “gay” and “LGBTQ” are used interchangeably.

Several of the characters analyzed in these plays are children, or adults looking back on their youthful experience with bullying and teen suicide. Often the term *perceived* will be used to indicate that an individual, usually the perpetrator of bullying in these plays, has interpreted the behavior of another youth to be associated with a non-cisgender and/or non-heteronormative identity. Whether the identified individual has “come out” (revealed their sexual identity to others) or not, the term *perceived* is used if the assuming youth has no confirmed knowledge of this fact. When referring to one or more persons, either fictional or not, who have publically disclosed aspects of their sexual or gender identity, the hyphenated terms *gay-identified* or *LGBTQ-Identified* may be used.

We are analyzing plays that, for the most part, are a response by one self-identified lesbian and five self-identified gay men to bullying and teen suicide. In their work, they created characters that defy normative gender behaviors to varying degrees. *Gender Expression*, such a vital aspect of these works, is defined as the way in which a person’s sense of being feminine or masculine is manifested through clothing, behavior, grooming, etc. While *Gender Identity* refers to the intrinsic sense a person has about whether they are male or female. Wilchins writes, “This term has its origins in psychiatry (Gender Identity Disorder). It is most commonly used to refer to transsexual and transgender individuals, who are those most at-risk for feeling some discordance between their bodies and the inner sense” (Wilchins 13). Other terms, including the many acronyms encountered within these pages, will be clarified as they appear.
As mentioned, the categorization of gender related attributes, sexual variances, and attractions initially stemmed from growing interests during the Victorian period in the emerging field of psychology and its taxonomies. But throughout the second half of the twentieth century, these classifications have taken on social-political implications that often supersede their psychological origins. Sinfield writes that:

“Our terms—“gay,” “lesbian,” “lesbian and gay,” “lesbian, gay and bisexual,” “dyke,” “queer”—are markers of political allegiance far more than ways of having or thinking about sex. They represent decisions about who we want to be aligned with, carved out in ongoing negotiations with the available repertoire.

(Sinfeld, Cultural Politics - Queer Reading 72)

This sentiment is echoed in this current study which has already defined “gay theatre” as more of a political movement than a psychological study of the characteristic of homosexuals. The gay and lesbian playwrights whose works are being analyzed in the following pages are primarily concerned with heterosexism and its negative effects on children and young adults, not the nature of the sexual desire of their characters.

Language does more than enable us to differentiate, it identifies difference: the difference between a stone and a cloud, or the difference between how you identify yourself and how I identify you. Words that differentiate lose their meaning if value is no longer given to the dissimilarities, and the language used to describe the differences eventually becomes archaic, unused, and nonsensical. It is to be hoped that the definitions people use to describe certain differences between us will become meaningless. Ideally, the terms people develop and continue to contrive to enable us to examine, debate, and discuss differences in gender, sexuality, and identity will become antiquated, in part through their own existence.
Youth who attend live theatre have a higher level of tolerance, a stronger sense of empathy, and are better able to recognize and appreciate what others are thinking than those who do not. In a study of 670 students conducted by the University of Arkansas’ Department of Educational Reform, researchers found that the 7th through 12th graders who were selected to participate in a class field trip to see a high-quality, live theatre performance demonstrated higher scores on the study’s tolerance measure than did the control group of students who did not attend. In the randomized field trial, led by Jay Greene, professor of Education Reform, researchers determined that live theatre increases the ability of students to recognize the emotion of others using the Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test (RMET), an evaluative technique that measures the capacity to infer what others are thinking, that was initially used to test for autism but is now widely used in studying empathy for people developing typically. An additional test was conducted to measure student interest in seeing live theatre, as a proxy for the cumulative effect of past theatre exposure, which indicated that past theatre experience also had a significantly positive effect on the student’s ability to read the emotions of others. Furthermore, the research showed that students did not gain the same benefit from simply reading the play or watching the film version. “Plays are meant to be seen performed live,” Greene said, “You can’t always take your kids to a play but if you can, you should. The story can be conveyed in a movie, but it doesn’t engage the viewer in the same way” (Greene et al.).

A study conducted by Dana Santomenna at St. John’s University in New York compared a sample of 160 students from two high schools that offered both a strong curricular and extra-
curricular theatre arts program with 124 students from two high schools that lacked a theatre arts program of any kind. Santomenna found that students, “in schools with a strong educational commitment to theatre arts had significantly higher grade-point averages, were more self-reliant, had higher scores on measures of empathy and perspective taking, liked their teachers more, and believed that the arts contributed more to students' education and to society than students in schools without a strong educational commitment to theatre arts” (Santomenna 79). These studies demonstrate the power of live theatre to positively affect youth, particularly in aiding the development of empathy and the ability to identify with others. Participating in live theatre, whether as a spectator or theatre-maker, improves the characteristics associated with positive social interaction.

This chapter explores two dramatic works written to be performed specifically for young audiences and effectively demonstrate theatre’s capacity to increase empathy and enhance the ability to understand and connect with others in the hopes of preventing bullying behaviors. Both of these dramatic texts are written by playwrights who have self-identified as members of the LGBTQ community, the demographic whose response to the bullying epidemic, particularly the events of September 2010, are being analyzed in this investigation. *The Misfits* by Brian Guehring adapted for the stage from the novel by James Howe, and *fml: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life* by Sarah Gubbins, were both written for young audiences and feature teenaged characters in middle school and high school respectively. This age range has been continually identified as the most vulnerable to the effects of bullying, with bullying trends tending to peak in the 9th grade with school transition (Brown, Birch, and Kancherla 384–392).
The Misfits: About the Playwright

As mentioned in Chapter Two, there still exists the prevailing and erroneous notion that the clear mark of success for a playwright in the United States is having your work produced on the “Great White Way,” or at least somewhere in Manhattan. Nevertheless, most of the “Identity plays” and the “AIDS plays,” those works which have had the most impact were all eventually produced either on Broadway or in Off-Broadway theatres. Part of the significance of The Boys in the Band, for example, is that it achieved box office success, not in a converted storefront theatre in Chelsea or an East Village café, but at Theatre Four on West 55th Street, two blocks from Broadway’s largest venues. The same is true for Fierstein’s trilogy, whose emblematic journey from La Mama E.T.C. to Broadway’s Little Theater garnered the attention necessary for wide-distribution of the published play. Kramer’s Normal Heart was crafted specifically as a personal protest for the eyes and ears of New Yorkers in order to publicly shame Mayor Koch into action. New York City was, after all, an epicenter for AIDS in 1985. But New York audiences, who currently pay an average ticket price above one-hundred dollars, are not necessarily the target audience for plays dealing with bullying and teen-suicide (Ng). If these works are to be most effective in inciting change and reducing bullying then at least some of these plays must address the individuals most involved and affected.

We begin with a playwright and activist who is in the trenches in the war on bullying, dealing directly with the population most at-risk. Brian Guehring has spent the last twenty-five years exploring the ways in which theatre can be used to give a voice to LGBTQ and questioning youth and bring attention to the issues and dilemmas specific to their lives. He is currently the Playwright-in-Residence and the Education Director at the Omaha Theatre Company, one of the
nation’s oldest and largest professional theatres for young people (“Rose Theater: History”). He is the recipient of the American Alliance for Theater and Education (AATE) Unpublished Play Project Award for his original interactive play, *The Super Adventures of Pyramid Man and Dr. Nutrition*, and for his adaptations of Wilson Rawls’ children’s novel *Where the Red Fern Grows* and Fred Gipson’s *Old Yeller*. As a playwright, Guehring has continually alternated between stage adaptations of novels and original works. His other adaptations include the Newberry Award winning novel *Julie of the Wolves*, by Jean Craighead George, *Miss Bindergarten*, by Joseph Slate, and *The Grocer’s Goblin and the Little Mermaid*, an intertwining of two classic tales by Hans Christian Andersen. His play, *The Bully Show*, was selected for the New Visions/New Voices new play development workshop at the Kennedy Center in 2002 (Guehring, “The Misfits” 1–2).

Guehring earned a BA in theatre from Duke University and an MFA in children’s theatre and creative drama from the University of Texas at Austin. While working on his MFA, Guehring volunteered at OutYouth, the local gay and lesbian teen outreach program in Austin, where he used devised and applied theatre techniques to engage local LGBTQ youth in exploring their own stories through non-performance centered theatrical activities. Guehring has been with the Omaha Theatre Company for Young People for about twenty years.

In addition to its mainstage season, which consist of plays for young audiences, OTC maintains a field operation which brings theatrical activities to elementary schools, and a teen theatre program which is led by actor-teachers from the resident adult company. While the program was originally formed to create opportunities for middle schoolers who would otherwise not have the chance to perform due to the lack of a program within their schools,
OTC’s teen theatre program has since evolved to include high school aged students as well. The program focuses on producing works that local schools tend to avoid due to their subject matter.

In his second year with OTC, Guehring started Pride Players, a theatre troupe within the larger teen theatre program, that specifically focuses on stories relevant to the experiences of LGBTQ identified and questioning youth. Initially, Pride Players used only devised and applied theatre techniques, using the same approach Guehring had used with OutYouth back in Austin. “When young performers are saying their own words, it’s more powerful,” says Guehring, “for people who may not be comfortable with traditional acting, they may be more comfortable saying the words they made up themselves. Plus, at the time we began, there weren’t many published plays about the queer youth experience, especially about queer youth in Omaha.”

Brian decided that the troupe would use devised theatre techniques to create its first piece. Sixteen young actors auditioned for the new company. “It was important to me to never ask the kids to ‘out’ themselves about why they wanted to be a part of the troupe,” Guehring explained, “the only thing I asked was that they be willing to play both a queer character and a homophobe, and if they couldn’t then this wasn’t the right project for them” (Guehring, Personal interview).

The project was initially supposed to be a one-year long endeavor but is currently in its eighteenth year and has become a significant part of OTC’s operation, with 20 – 25 teenage actors participating on average each season. The core objective of Pride Players remains giving a voice to LGBT and questioning youth performers within a safe environment. However, they now perform four productions a year at the theatre and tour schools, theatres, and community
centers educating their young audiences about gay issues, which has become an additional and vital goal. “I want the audience to learn new perspectives and perhaps be more aware of their actions, even if it’s just learning not to say things such as ‘that’s so gay’ ... but we still use a lot of humor and theatricality to draw them in” (Guehring, Personal interview).

In 2006, while reading James Howe’s popular novel, The Misfits (2001), it occurred to Guehring that this was the perfect story with which to get across the same themes of empathy, inclusivity, and anti-bullying that Pride Players had been tackling for years. The novel included an openly gay teen primary character, which was still a rarity in works published for middle schoolers. Yet the novel was not about “being gay” per se, but instead focused on an eclectic group of middle schoolers who were being bullied for a variety of different reasons.

The Misfits: About the Novelist

James Howe is the author of over ninety books for young readers and is known for the award-winning bestseller Bunnicula, about a pet rabbit that is suspected of being a vegetarian vampire, which he wrote with his late wife, Deborah Howe, in 1977. He graduated from Boston University and received a master’s in theatre from Hunter College (“Mark Davis, James Howe”). The couple went on to write one other children’s book together, Teddy Bear’s Scrapbook, before Deborah’s untimely death from cancer in 1978. “I was thirty-one when Debbie died. I had a job in Manhattan, an apartment in Brooklyn, two cats, and two unsold children’s book manuscripts. Still working as a literary agent and dreaming of being a theatre director, I had no intention of becoming a children’s book writer,” Howe recalled, “but the truth was, I wasn’t sure what I was going to do with the rest of my life. My world had been turned upside down” (Howe, “About the Author”) Both books were bought by Atheneum and Howe began to focus
exclusively on writing novels, shelving his dreams of working in the theatre. In the years that followed, Howe continued to write stories for young readers, including six more books in the *Bunnicula* series, which have been awarded over a dozen Children’s Choice Awards, including the Nene Award and the Cooperative Children’s Book Council Award. He is also the author of several acclaimed novels for older readers, including *The Watcher*, and is the editor of the anthologies *The Color of Absence: 12 Stories About Loss and Hope* and *13: Thirteen Stories That Capture the Agony and Ecstasy of Being Thirteen*. After a long, personal struggle, Howe publicly came out as gay at the age of fifty-one and currently lives with his husband, Mark Davis, in upstate New York (Howe, “About the Author”; “Mark Davis, James Howe”; Howe, “Teaching Tolerance: Totally James”).

Howe wrote *The Misfits* in 2001, and followed with three additional books about the adventures of the Gang of Five, each with a focus on one particular character: *Totally Joe* (2005), *Addie on the Inside* (2011), and *Also Known as Elvis* (2014). “In *The Misfits* and *Totally Joe*, an underlying theme that kept surfacing had to do with my own feelings of being different as a boy and then a man,” Howe reflected, “my own shame about being gay, my own discomfort, my own wish that I could be open and accepting and be accepted. These feelings kept bubbling up in my work, which often celebrated difference and feeling good about who you are” (Howe, “Teaching Tolerance: Totally James”).

*The Misfits* inspired the national movement known as No Name-Calling Week (est. 2004), which was initiated by GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network) and sponsored by Simon and Shuster Publishing, and is observed by thousands of middle and
elementary schools each year. Howe’s many books frequently deal with the acceptance of
difference and being true to oneself.

**The Misfits: Production History**

In 2007, after falling in love with Howe’s book *Totally Joe*, Guehring picked up a copy of *The Misfits*. “I knew immediately that I wanted our company (OTC) to bring this funny, touching, and important book to the stage,” Guehring wrote (Guehring, “The Misfits” 2). He kept the idea on the back burner for a few years as he continued writing other stage adaptations and working with Pride Players. But in 2010, Guehring brought the idea for an adaptation of *The Misfits* to the artistic director of OTC, who decided to pursue it as a full season selection. When James Howe was contacted, the famed novelist originally offered to do the stage adaptation himself since, after all, he did have a master’s degree in theatre. Guehring had offered to assist as dramaturg, but when Howe’s publisher had set a closer than expected deadline for his current novel (*Addie on the Inside*, his fourth sequel to *The Misfits*), Howe decided it was best if Guehring write the adaptation. Guehring was, of course, thrilled at this opportunity.

Having had significant experience in the theatre and a firm understanding of the ways in which the medium differs in both scope and effect from that of a novel, Howe recognized and appreciated the necessity of the changes Guehring had reluctantly made to both the story and the characters for it to work as a stage play. Adapting a novel for the stage is a reductive act that consists of identifying what is essential and then stripping away that which isn’t. But this act of stripping away also removes information from those who will bring the play to life on the stage. This loss is not only necessary, but propels the act of theatre-making by forcing the
actors, designers, and director to fill in what has been removed through their own interpretive skills. In talking about the difference between dramatic and nondramatic literature, David Ball writes that, “Nondramatic literature usually offers much more character information than does drama. In fact, drama offers hardly any.... The playwright must leave most of the character blank to accommodate the nature of the actor ... Scripts contain bones, not people” [Emphasis in the original] (Ball 60–61).

Howe’s notes on the first draft of the stage adaptation were primarily concerned with specific sections of dialogue. After creating four novels in the series, Howe was utterly familiar with the manner in which each of the characters speak. His suggestions were readily taken by Guehring. “He has been so thoughtful with his notes on each of the drafts and such a great partner on this play,” Guehring wrote, “one of my personal highlights was hosting Jim, his husband and daughter in Omaha where they were able to see our professional production of The Misfits and also see the teen theatre troupe Pride Players.”

The Misfits premiered at The Rose Theatre, home of the Omaha Theater Company, in February 2011, performed by OTC’s resident adult company of actors. In 2012, a grant from the American Alliance for Theatre and Education’s Playwrights in Our Schools program enabled further development of the text, this time while working with young actors in the drama program at Park City High School in Utah. The analysis that follows refers to this second version of the script, which features a larger cast of characters and additional scenes that did not appear in the original OTC production (Guehring, “The Misfits”).
The Misfits: Analysis

For those unfamiliar with the highly popular novel, The Misfits, a wonderful point of entry into James Howe’s world of Paintbrush Falls, New York, would be through a description of the play’s four protagonists: Bobby, Addie, Joe, and Skeezie. While it is tempting to include the abundance of information about each of these characters found in the novel and its sequels, the descriptions here will be limited to what is told to us only through Brian Guehring’s stage adaptation, which was written in consultation with Howe.

All four of the Gang of Five are in the same class at Paintbrush Falls Middle School, where much of the action takes place. Bobby Goodspeed is twelve-years old and lives with his father in a trailer home. His mother died the summer before he entered the third grade, and this has greatly affected both Bobby and his dad. This specific way in which his mother’s death affected Bobby is revealed in the climatic speech he gives at the end of the play at the school election assembly. Throughout the play, Bobby demonstrates a keen ability to speak from the heart and say just the right thing in order to accomplish the goals of the group. But he does this in a way that is thoughtful and sincere, not manipulative. Bobby is overweight and has been called names by other kids for many years, especially by the troublemaking bully, Kevin. Some of these names include fatso, dough boy, lardo, pork chop, and especially Fluff.

Like Bobby and the other members of the group, Addie has also been the victim of name-calling. She is quite tall for her age and has been taunted with words like freakazoid, giant, dork, nerd, beanpole, and show-off. It is interesting to note that Addie is teased about her height, which would likely be a social asset for a male her age. (More about gender differences in bullying and Addie’s height will be discussed in the last section of this chapter.)
Addie is also highly intelligent and is acknowledged by the others as the smartest one in the group. She has come to a point in her social and intellectual development where she both identifies the injustices around her and is determined, perhaps a bit impulsively at times, to eradicate them.

The other two members of the Gang of Five are Joe and Skeezie. Perhaps one can tell a bit about Joe from the names he has been called, that include fruit, girly-boy, Josephine, homo, fairy, and faggot. This last is also spray-painted, and misspelled, on his locker during the course of the play. But there is much more to Joe than these names indicate. Guehring describes him as “a creative, flamboyant, and confident boy who currently has a streak of pink in his hair” (Guehring, “The Misfits” 2). Throughout the course of the play, he wrestles with his identity, and even changes his name to JoDan for a while. He has disclosed his homosexuality to the other members of the group, as well as his Aunt Pam. Like Joe, Skeezie is also a non-conformist, choosing to wear his hair slicked back while maintaining the attitude of a rebel. He is unconcerned with every day manners and his eating habits can be a bit hard to witness, even for his close friends. Skeezie’s family doesn’t have a lot of money, and the names he is called often revolve around this fact: white trash, hooligan, greaseball, dummy, and poor boy.

The play features a large cast of additional characters, including several other middle-schoolers whose presence is vital to the story. DuShawn is a popular athlete. He is African-American and his involvement with the Gang of Five leads them to explore issues of race, status, identity, and the difference between visible and invisible minorities. Colin is also popular, and is known for treating everyone equally, regardless of what group they may associate with at the school. Colin’s actions in the play, like DuShawn’s, help to underscore the
difference between perception and truth. Kelsey is a quiet, shy girl, who is in art class with Bobby and Joe. Bobby develops romantic feelings for Kelsey but is uncertain if they are mutual, which causes him to seek out his father’s advice.

There are four adult characters in *The Misfits*. Bobby’s dad is unimposing, likeable, and a generally good father who takes an interest in his son’s affairs. He works in a nursery where things aren’t going well, but he is hesitant to let Bobby know of his troubles. Ms. Wyman is the Gang of Five’s math teacher. The initial conflict begins in her class room, when Addie refuses to stand for the Pledge of Allegiance. Mr. Kellerman is the school principal, and much of the plot revolves around the Gang of Five convincing him that a change is needed at the school, whether it be a third political party for student government or a no name-calling day. Mr. Kellerman is an amalgamation of two characters from the novel, and so he serves an additional function in the play. Mr. Kellerman seems to be in a foul mood for much of the play, and initially the Gang of Five respond by referring to him with nicknames such as “Killerman,” but when it is suggested to Bobby that there might be a personal reason for the principal’s distemper, he begins to make a connection between identity and name-calling. The final adult character is Pam, Joe’s understanding and wise aunt who works as a server at the Candy Kitchen Ice Cream Shop.

Plays begin by either presenting a world in stasis or an indication of what that stasis was. According to David Ball, “Stasis is motionlessness: a condition of balance among various forces; a standing still; an unchanging stability; a state where all the forces balance each other, resulting in no movement” [Emphasis in the original] (Ball 19). At the start of Brian Guehring’s stage adaptation of *The Misfits*, the audience is presented with a clear indication of the world in
stasis, where the forces in balance have existed in much the same state for approximately the last seven years. This calculation can be made based on a comment at the beginning of the first scene when 12-year-old Bobby, the protagonist and narrator, tells the audience that he has been best friends with Addie, Skeezie, and Joe since kindergarten. Most children begin Kindergarten at the age of five. It is clear that this state of stasis, although in balance, is not a state of equality or harmony for the four friends. Bobby confides in us that, “The four of us have been called more than our fair share of names. Kids who get called the worst names oftentimes find each other. That’s how it was with us.” This statement both explains the reasoning for the initial friendship and sets up the primary forces at work in the play. The four friends refer to themselves as the Gang of Five. “We do it to keep people on their toes. Make ‘em wonder. Or maybe we do it because we figure that there’s one more kid out there who’s going to need a gang to be a part of. A misfit, like us” (Guehring, “The Misfits” 5). For many years, the friends have met once a week at a restaurant call the Candy Kitchen, where Joe’s Aunt Pam works as a waitress. These are the ongoing circumstances presented to us at the start of the play: four unpopular seventh-graders bound together by common antagonists.

Ball reveals that, “For a play to begin to play, there must be an intrusion ... In every play something or someone comes along to shatter stasis” (Ball 20). In The Misfits, stasis is shattered when Addie proposes the idea of the group forming a third political party at their middle school in order to run for the student government. “What I want to know is,” Addie asks the group at the start of one of their weekly Candy Kitchen meetings, “if there is a contest between somebody who’s really popular and someone who isn’t popular, but stands for Truth and Freedom and Liberty for All, do you think the person who stands for Truth and Freedom and
Liberty for All has a chance of winning?” (Guehring, “The Misfits” 8). The statement itself comes from Addie’s growing sense of resentment at the injustice she sees around her, particularly the inequity in treatment between the popular students who often bully, and her own group of friends who are unpopular and have been the victims of name-calling since kindergarten. The “intrusion” into the established stasis seems, then, to have been the inevitable psycho-social development of Addie, a character who is both the most intelligent of the group and the most aggressive in fighting for her beliefs.

The intrusion of Addie’s new found awareness of the injustices that have long existed at their school, and her ability to convince her three close friends that action needs to be taken to eradicate these injustices, triggers a series of events that ends the stasis that has long existed and sets the play in motion and resolves with a new stasis wherein the school environment is more accepting of difference and far less threatening for the Gang of Five.

Ball’s method suggests that those analyzing a play should first look at the series of actions within the play’s structure, with each action consisting of two parts. The first action is referred to as a trigger, and the second action is its resulting heap. Analyst should also look at this series of events in reverse. This method of analysis reveals how the play is structured by reviewing the series of events in reverse order from the return of stasis back through to the initial intrusion. To do this, the moment, manner, and form in which stasis returns needs to be identified. According to Ball, “stasis comes about at the close of the play when the major forces of the play either get what they want or stop trying” (Ball 21).

In the penultimate scene of The Misfits, Principal Kellerman and Ms. Wyman, their math teacher, both of whom have been somewhat antagonistic toward the Gang of Five’s efforts to
make the school a more equitable and less threatening place, have been inspired to declare a “No Name-Calling Week” in an effort to stop bullying and name-calling. Their inspiration stems from a speech that the excruciatingly shy Bobby gives in front of the entire student body during the assembly for student government elections. Using the vocabulary established by Ball, the speech is a trigger that leads to a change-of-heart for the adults at the school, which is the heap in this instance. In terms of Freytag’s dramatic structure, Bobby’s speech is the climatic event of the play, the turning point at which the efforts of the protagonist(s) begin to show clear success. The trigger of the speech leads to multiple heaps, when the subplots are accounted for. Bobby begins his speech by pointing out that the well-known saying, “sticks and stone may break our bones but names will never hurt me,” simply isn’t a true statement. He reveals the very personal affect name-calling has had on him:

> When I was in third grade, I got the name Fluff because I ate peanut butter and Marshmallow Fluff sandwiches every day for lunch, and also, I guess, because I started putting on weight. But nobody knew why I was eating those sandwiches. One day, my dad made me one for lunch and told me, “These were your mom’s favorite kind of sandwich.” My mom had died the summer before and I missed her. And so from then on I wouldn’t eat anything but peanut butter and Marshmallow Fluff sandwiches for lunch. But every time I did, somebody was bound to call out, “Hey, Fluff!” Names do hurt. They hurt because we believe them. (Guehring, “The Misfits” 64)

Bobby then suggests that the school hold a “no-name calling day” in the hopes of getting others to realize the value of every person and the effect bullying can have.

> Working backwards, the Gang of Five’s presence at the school assembly as the newly established No Name Party is the result of a persistent effort on the part of Addie and Bobby to
gain permission from Principal Kellerman and Ms. Wyman to form a third party. Permission was only granted once Bobby passionately explained that he and his friends had spent most of their years at school being called names and that they believe that a new party might bring attention to the issue of bullying and change the school environment. The Gang of Five’s original idea for the political party, initially called The Freedom Party, stemmed from Addie’s objection to the standing for the Pledge of Allegiance on the basis that “liberty and justice for all” does not yet truly exist in either the nation or at the Paintbrush Falls Middle School.

In complex dramatic works, even those written for middle schoolers, the subplots are interwoven with the events of the main plot. There are three subplots in The Misfits. Two involve romantic entanglements as the Gang of Five prepares for the upcoming school dance, which serves as the encapsulating event of the play. The third revolves around Bobby’s relationship with his father, who seems to have given up on his life’s ambitions after the death of his wife, Bobby’s mom, several years earlier.

The first romantic subplot explores the added complexities that arise when the action takes place in a world with non-heterosexual individuals. To be clear, non-cisgender and non-heterosexual individuals have existed for as long as there have been people. But until the mid-twentieth-century, American novels, short stories, plays, and other forms of fiction have rarely reflected the existence of anyone other than cisgender heterosexuals. Even today, gay or transgendered characters are particularly absent from plays intended for young audiences, making this stage adaptation of The Misfits even more necessary. In this subplot, Addie and Joe are both attracted to the same boy, the sweet and popular Colin. Joe assumes Colin would never be attracted to him, an assumption many gay adolescents make about the people around
them. Addie, however, leaves a “somebody likes you” note in Colin’s locker. The note instructs Colin that his secret admirer will be at the Candy Kitchen at four o’clock that afternoon. Colin does show up and finds the full Gang of Five in their usual booth and his flirtatious behavior leads Addie to believe that their attraction is mutual. This is a particularly delightful subplot, one that appears in the novel in a slightly different form. The storyline underscores how people, even those who have gay friends or family, commonly assume that others are heterosexual even though no evidence has been given for this assumption. Colin mistakenly believed the note to be from Joe, and showed up at the Candy Corner in hopes of meeting with him. The object of his flirtatious behavior is mistaken by Addie. After hearing Bobby’s inspiring speech, Colin finds the courage to ask Joe to the dance. But, as the quirky yet perceptive Skeezie points out, Addie has her own romantic admirer in DuShawn, who has been demonstrating his attraction by shooting spitballs at her all year. In the end, Addie and DuShawn attend the dance together along with Joe and Colin. Looking back, Colin’s actions have been consistent from the beginning of the play in terms of his attraction to Joe, but they are continually disregarded due to the “assumption of heterosexuality” by the young characters, even the openly gay Joe.

The second romantic subplot is a simpler one. It revolves around Bobby’s crush on Kelsey, a girl in the art class he and Joe are taking together. Bobby, being painfully shy and having the low self-esteem that comes from years of being called names, cannot bring himself to ask Kelsey to the dance and even assumes she is attracted to Joe, since the two have recently formed a friendship. As with Colin, Bobby’s speech at the election assembly inspires Kelsey to ask Bobby to the dance.
Bobby’s father seems to have lost all sense of ambition or motivation since the death of his wife. In the final subplot, Bobby opens up to his father about the names he has been called and his father confides in him that he was also the victim of name-calling when he was Bobby’s age, which has had a lasting effect on him. “I took them with me into the rest of my life,” he tells Bobby. Discovering the impact this type of bullying has had on his father, Bobby decides that the speech he said he will write for Addie for the election assembly the following day will be about the effects of name-calling. But after reading the speech, Addie and the other Gang of Five members insist that Bobby give the speech himself. Bobby’s dad goes out of his way to attend the assembly. Ultimately, Bobby’s courage inspires his own father, who agrees to be a chaperone for the school dance.

Ball writes that, “Talking is drama’s most common activity. Talking conveys all we are likely to know about a play, its people, its progress. All this talking, of course, must occur in a way that supports the pretense of impersonation” [Emphasis in the original] (Ball 27). Both of the plays examined in this chapter feature primarily teenage characters, who are wrestling with the natural stresses and anxieties that come with puberty and the development of sexual identity, along with the establishment of one’s place in the social structure that surrounds them. This inevitably has a strong effect on how adolescents use language, which may often come across to adults as an awkward combination of insecure affectation or rebellion. But Penelope Eckert, a professor of linguistics at Stanford University who has written extensively on social identity in high school as well as language and gender, points out that our perspective on the language of adolescents tends to be unnecessarily critical.
As a life stage, adolescence is generally compared with adulthood, rather than with the life stage that precedes it. As a result, comparisons tend to be negative, and adolescents tend to be viewed in terms of the development that they have not yet accomplished rather than what they have accomplished. Rather than seeing the adolescent social order as a poor version of the adult one, it would be productive to see it as the tremendous leap that it is from the arrangements of childhood. (Eckert 115–116)

They also display the language quirks and idiosyncrasies specific to the region of the United States in which they grew up. In The Misfits, the Gang of Five have all grown up in a small town in upstate New York, while the older teens of fml: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life: How Carson McCullers Saved My life live in a suburb of Chicago.

The dialogue of James Howe’s teenage characters, which is generally maintained in Brian Guehring’s stage adaptation, tends to be innocuous and free of grammatical aggravations or the defensive habits one would likely find in a more realistic world of adolescents. Each of the Gang of Five exhibits a sort of uncensored innocence and tends to speak in complete and direct phrases, yet still demonstrate an unmistakable difference between each other in characteristics. Addie is clearly established as the leader, not only because she is the initiator of the action but because her intellectual development allows her to use language in a way that naturally commands respect from the others who are in her group (and perhaps resentment from those who are not). Since The Misfits is a play about the effects of language on self-esteem, and the bullying presented in the play is primarily confined to name-calling, either verbally or written (the spray painting of the misspelled word “fagot” on Joe’s locker) the connection between language and status presented in the world of the play is acceptable. With
the exception of Addie, the speech patterns and linguistic skill of the other students is generally the same. Character differentiation is primarily derived from what the characters value, not how they express those values. Joe delights in pop culture references, usually concerning celebrity divas such as Lady Gaga (a change from Madonna in the novel). Skeezie strives to maintain an aura of individualism by rejecting the social norms other students at Paintbrush Falls adhere to with determination, including those involving hygiene and dress. The overall effect creates a clarity that might be desired in a play intended for middle-schools, while neither demonstrating nor glorifying faulty or aggravating linguistic behavior. This use of clear, straightforward dialogue helps to underscore the name-calling that is the focus of the piece. This is quite different from the way Sarah Gubbins uses dialogue, where a clear and generally successful effort has been made to replicate the realistic verbal habits so common with late adolescents, including, as discussed shortly, the incessant use of the word “like.”

However, there is an important exchange of dialogue which perfectly touches on an essential aspect of this investigation. Sometimes youth unintentionally use phrases that are hurtful and communicate heterosexism. In The Misfits, there is a scene where the Gang of Five have convinced the popular DuShawn to run as their president. Addie calls to order, “The official first meeting of the Freedom Party.” To which DuShawn replies, “Official first meeting. That’s so gay.” The expression “That’s so gay” is commonly used by young people to convey that they believe something is stupid, weird, or undesirable (Woodford, Howell, and Silverschanz 417). When Addie chastises him about his use of the phrase, he replies, “Oh, man, I didn’t mean nothin’ by it. It’s just a word” (Guehring, “The Misfits” 27). DuShawn is sincere in his reply, and Joe lets the remark pass. But the phase “That’s so gay” is heterosexist and
demeaning. A study conducted with college age students shows that the phrase acts as a microaggression that may interfere with LGBTQ students’ learning and growth. Michael R. Woodford, Michael L. Howell, and Perry Silverschanz, authors of the 2013 study conclude that:

The phrase needs to be defined as an offensive slur, like racial and gender remarks that would not be tolerated. Further, student leaders must model respectful behavior and not say “that’s so gay.” We recommend these individuals be engaged in educational campaigns addressing heterosexist language. In addition, university community members, especially staff and faculty, must be prepared to intervene when they hear “that’s so gay.”

(Woodford, Howell, and Silverschanz 426–31)

**fml: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life: About the Playwright**

Sarah Gubbins is a Chicago playwright and grew up in the suburb of LaGrange, where *fml: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life* takes place. But Gubbins is adamant that the piece is not autobiographical. “Listen, I'm gay. And I was a teenager. And I had to go through a huge awakening as a writer. And I had very influential English teachers. All these things happened to me,” She states. But Gubbins is quick to point out that, “I wasn't out when I was a teenager. In some ways Jo [the primary character in *fml: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life*] is my superhero self, the teen I wish I had been" (qtd. in Isaacs). Initially, Gubbins was intent on becoming an actor. But while an undergraduate at Northwestern University, she took a writing class with John Logan (Tony Award winner for *Red*) who was in residence with the university at the time. She began serving as a freelance dramaturge with companies like Next, Steppenwolf, Court, and Naked Eye where she became the literary manager. Gubbins was able to focus on dramaturgy for new works, exposing her to the process of how a play is developed. “And I think
being a witness to the new play process is what started giving me the confidence, later on, to start writing my own stuff,” she recalled, “I was strongly encouraged by the writers I was working with to pursue my own writing—and so I did! It was a longer road to writing for me” (qtd. in Royal).

Gubbins returned to Northwestern for an MFA in Writing for the Stage and Screen, and her play *Fair Use* (2008), loosely based on Edmond Rostand’s *Cyrano de Bergerac*, was selected for production though Steppenwolf’s First Look Repertory of New Work just after she graduated. She continued to write plays and became a resident playwright at Chicago Dramatists and an Artistic Associate at About Face Theatre. In 2012 she was awarded a Joseph Jefferson Award for best new play for *The Kid Thing* (2012), about a lesbian couple whose relationship is challenged by an impending pregnancy. The play was developed by the Steppenwolf Theater and produced by Chicago Dramatists and About Face Theater.

Gubbins other works include *In Loco Parentis* (2011), *I am Bradley Manning* (2012), *The Water Play* (2013), and *Cocked* (2015). Her plays have been staged at the Public Theatre, the New York Theatre Workshop, and the Goodman Theatre. She was awarded the Edgerton Foundation New American Play Prize, served as the 2010-11 Carl J. Djerassi Playwriting Fellow at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and was a 2011-12 Jerome Fellow at the Playwrights’ Center. She was named Best Playwright of 2012 by *Chicago* magazine. She is currently a writer for the new Amazon series, *I Love Dick*, produced by Jill Soloway (*Transparent, Six Feet Under*) which is set to premier on May 12, 2017 (Felsenthal; Gubbins, “Sarah Gubbins”).
**fml: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life: Production History**

Sarah Gubbins had never given any thought to writing a play that might be categorized as “Theatre for Young Audiences.” But that is how things turned out after she approached Steppenwolf about an idea she had for a play. Actually, it was less an idea, and more the urge to rage, ignited by the media coverage of a story that was spreading across the nation:

One balmy fall afternoon in late 2010 I was sitting on my back porch in Chicago talking to my friend, director Joanie Schultz. The news of Rutgers student, Tyler Clemente’s suicide was all over the media. I was angry and shocked but mostly I was confused. How did this keep happening? What makes someone willfully want to bully another person just because they are gay? Why are gay individuals so threatening to these bullies? And what would it take to stop this epidemic of teen suicides? (Gubbins, “Confessions of a Reluctant TYA Playwright”).

Gubbins met with Hallie Gordon, the Director of Steppenwolf’s Young Adult Programs, and Polly Carl, then Director of Artistic Development at Steppenwolf. Steppenwolf’s Young Adult company had already scheduled a stage adaptation of Carson McCullers’ *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* for their fall season and mentioned to Gubbins that it might be an interesting thematic tie-in if she could incorporate the novel into her yet to be written work, but added that there was no pressure to do so. Gubbins read the novel and was immediately inspired to write *fml: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life* with McCullers’ novel serving as the unifying centerpiece that would connect the fantasy world of Jo’s graphic novel to her developing relationship with her English teacher, while also reflecting on the events of her own life (Gubbins, “Confessions of a Reluctant TYA Playwright”).
"fml: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life" premiered in February 2012 as part of Steppenwolf Theatre Company’s Young Adult program, directed by Joanie Schultz. It has since been produced by Alliance Theatre and 7 Stages, both in Atlanta, as well as various colleges and universities across the country. Critical reaction to the Steppenwolf Production was generally favorable, with *Time Out*'s Zachary Whittenberg rating it four out of five stars, but cautioning the parents of viewers not quite in middle school themselves: “"fml: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life" is unsparing in its final scenes, directed throughout with aplomb by Joanie Schultz, and in its use of adult language ... But for all who are ready, this heartfelt call to action is a must-see.” In the *Chicago Tribune*, Chris Jones wrote that, “Gubbins' play has some terrific individual scenes of dialogue between Jo and her big brother and her mostly supportive straight pal, some of which have that clear ring of the way teen life is really lived” (C. Jones, “Dose of Honesty Would Improve This Story of Teenage Life”).

*fml: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life*: Analysis

The abbreviation that begins the title, *fml: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life*, is an expression of frustration with one’s circumstances commonly used in texting by twenty-first century youth. The letters are intentionally in lowercase. The letters ML stand for “my life.” Texting is a significant element in the play. In fact, an important character is represented in the play entirely through texts. This nod to modern technology stands in contrast to the literary reference on the other side of the colon and ties in to the dual nature of the play itself.

There are five characters that appear onstage in *fml: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life*, and several characters who never appear on stage, but whose actions nonetheless have a fundamental impact on the story. Jo is the central character, a high school junior who loves
playing basketball, and it quite good at it. She is a lesbian and has come out to both her best friend and her brother. Jo and her brother live in a run-down Victorian house on the south side of LaGrange, what she refers to as the “bad” side, meaning that her family is not wealthy. Like Addie in *The Misfits*, Jo has reached a point in her social-intellectual development where she is beginning to recognize the inequities surrounding her while also starting to reject the gender restrictions placed upon her, particularly the uniform regulations of the Catholic school she attends. The school requires that the girls wear plaid skirts, while the boys are allowed to wear pants. With the onset of winter, the school announces the date after which the girls are allowed to choose pants as well in order to avoid the cold, but Jo refuses to wait for this announcement and wears pants when she feels it is just too cold for the skirt, which she detests. She is given repeated detentions for this action and complains to the dean. The school eventually decides to allow girls to wear navy blue pants regardless of the weather. As with many elements of the play, Jo’s behavior mirrors those of author Carson McCullers, who notoriously wore men’s clothing throughout the 1940s.

Jo is also a graphic artist and throughout the play the audience is exposed to her artwork, which is projected on the set. Because Jo’s art is such an integral part of the world of *fml: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life*, Gubbins is very specific in her description, stating that, “All the panels, chapter titles, and text messages called for are panels from Jo’s graphic novel, *fml: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life*. As such, they should have the unified look of a single artist’s hand” (*fml: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life* 5).

The two people closest to Jo are Mickey and Reed. Mickey is Jo’s best friend and he inspires Jo to develop her doodles into a graphic novel. He is also gay and attends the same
high school as Jo, which they both refer to as “St. Paul the Unbearable.” He does not feel comfortable at school, and has already begun to focus on what comes next. Mickey sometimes misses school due to bullying, but tries to underplay his concern to Jo. “I just had to get out of there,” he tells Jo, “The Neanderthals in gym class and all that” (*Fml: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life* 37–38). Mickey often remarks that he feels invisible, that if he disappeared no one would notice, not even his parents. Reed is Jo’s brother. He is a college drop-out in his mid-twenties who loves music and spends his days pretending to be a DJ. He is accepting of the fact that his sister is gay and regrets not being there for her when she is the victim of a gay-bashing.

There are two characters who have both recently arrived into Jo’s life. Emma is a transfer student who has recently joined Jo and Mickey’s class. She has become friends with Jo as well as some of the more popular students who have bullied both Jo and Mickey in the past. Emma is almost always using her cellphone, primarily for texting her boyfriend. Ms. Delaney is the new English teacher who introduces Jo to Carson McCullers’ novel, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. In describing the character, Gubbins states, “She carries a sorrow so deep it’s calming.” During a private discussion about *Lonely Hunter*, Ms. Delaney reveals to Jo that, like the character of John Singer, she has lost someone she loved. Jo tells her, “That person must have been really wonderful if you loved them.” Ms. Delaney replies, “She was” (*Fml: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life* 52).

Two characters appear in the play in a form other than that of a live actor. The character of Tyler, the central antagonist, and Emma’s boyfriend, is presented entirely through Emma’s cellphone either as text, which are projected on the set, or through one-sided phone conversations. Tyler is a football player and quite popular. He is also homophobic and
continually texts gay slurs about Mickey and Jo to Emma. Tyler is possessive of Emma, even a bit of a stalker. He is resentful of Jo’s friendship with Emma, and repeatedly warns Emma that she should not be socializing with a lesbian, and threatens that there will be violence against Jo if he finds that anything romantic develops between them. The choice to keep Tyler as a faceless yet consistent presence in the play forces the audience to see the character exclusively from Emma and Jo’s perspective. Saint Michael is a character created by Jo in the world of her graphic novel, who represents her alternative self. The character is based on the archangel who cast Satan from Heaven, but is also a device that allows the play to reveal action not depicted on the stage by the live actors, particularly during the scene where Jo is attacked by unseen assailants. In this scene, the live action goes to blackout and the audience is shown several panels from Jo’s graphic novel depicting St. Michael being thrown to the ground and kicked until her ribs cracked.

In *fml: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life*, stasis is broken with the arrival of the new English teacher, Ms. Delaney, who inspires Jo by assigning Carson McCullers’ book to her class and also reading passages aloud to them. Ms. Delaney is the intrusion that ends a stasis very similar to the one seen at the beginning of *The Misfits* – Jo and Mickey have lived with bullying and feelings of isolation and alienation for so long that they have come to accept this as a frightening, yet unchangeable fact of life. As Jo listens to Ms. Delaney read, she begins to identify with John Singer, the misunderstood outsider and central character in the famous novel. Jo also begins to develop romantic feelings toward her teacher, who becomes a mentor and advocate. Stasis is reestablished at the end of the play with the departure of Ms. Delaney,
who has been fired from St. Paul due to “irreconcilable differences” after attempting to help Mickey start a gay-straight alliance (GSA) at the school.

To unveil the domino effect that has led us from intrusion to a return of stasis, let’s take a quick look at the series of actions that occur in *fml: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life* in reverse order. Ms. Delaney’s departure is due to her being fired for helping Mickey attempt to organize a GSA at the Catholic high school. There may be additional reasons for her dismissal, including her assignment choice of the still somewhat controversial McCullers novel, or coming out as a lesbian. Both Ms. Delaney and Mickey are motivated to start a GSA after Jo is hospitalized after being brutally attacked by a gang of boys in the locker room of the school after a basketball game. The play does not have a simple structure, and its complexities and nuances, along with the highly credible dialogue, create a sense of realism that allows the viewer to either relate to or recall their own high school experiences. This realism also stands in stark contrast to the world of Saint Michael in the graphic novel that is projected throughout the play. When visiting Jo in the hospital, Mickey says that he believes Tyler was behind the attack, even though Jo was unable to see the faces of her attackers since they were wearing the hoods of their sweatshirts. No other suspect is mentioned in the play, but since Tyler has threatened Jo before via various text messages to Emma, including one that read, “4 real ill kill her if she touches u” (*fml: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life* 27), Mickey’s accusation certainly seems reasonable. Before the attack, Jo has a discussion with Ms. Delaney concerning the reasons why John Singer takes his own life in *Lonely Hunter* after the death of his companion, Spiros. Ms. Delaney explains that losing someone you love is painful and that pain may never go away. Ms. Delaney then reveals that she has recently lost someone she loved.
Ms. Delaney also consoles Jo, since she has found out that earlier the word “faggot” was spray painted on Jo’s locker. Emma and Mickey discovered the graffiti. When Emma says that she believes Tyler was not responsible, Mickey accuses her of being blind to Tyler’s true nature.

Throughout the play, projections on the set reveal the ongoing adventures of Jo’s alter-ego, the archangel St. Michael, that Jo created after Mickey encouraged her to develop her sketches. Through the panels of the graphic novel Jo is drawing, the audience is exposed to Jo’s inner thoughts where she fantasizes about dancing with her English teacher. The audience is also shown drawings of St. Michael doing things Jo cannot, such as tearing apart a locker with the word “faggot” spray painted on it.

Unlike Howe or Guehring, Gubbins explores realistic, contemporary language patterns for her teenage characters that reflect the angst and insecurity, as well as the desire to declare individuality, that adolescents often wrestle with. The playwright is also investigating class difference in language patterns through the use of characters who live in the town where she grew up. Gubbins is skilled at capturing the speech patterns and affectations of twenty-first century American teenagers and this, unfortunately, can be quite irksome at times, particularly with the incessant misuse of “like” and overuse of “awesome.” Thankfully this is somewhat balanced by the inclusion of McCullers lyrical language as recited by Ms. Delaney. Gubbins also captures the cautious way adolescents deal with emotion or vulnerability in language. One senses how peer pressure and the need to assimilate act as a filter for every honest sentiment the characters wish to communicate. As Eckert points out, “Language plays a key role in the creation and maintenance of social groups in general, hence of adolescent peer groups ...

Groups jointly look out on a social landscape and they jointly create distinctiveness for
themselves, placing themselves strategically in that landscape” (Eckert 113). Both Jo and Mickey are socially isolated but use the language of their St. Paul peers since this is not a particular barrier they are interested in putting up. However, there are actions that both characters consciously take (or do not take) that distinguish them from the majority, primarily involving the rejection of established gender norms.

The worlds of *The Misfits* and *fml: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life* are both constructed to spark recognition, whether that comes in the form of remembrance of our own middle or high school years long past or, more importantly, of the current journey one is making through adolescence. For the plays to effectively inspire change, the audience must identify with the environment, particularly the young adults for whom both plays were written. There is little relevancy to fact that Paintbrush Falls, New York, is entirely fictional but you can visit LaGrange, Illinois, on your way to Chicago. The plays are most successful when the thought occurs to us that, “I know a girl just like Addie” or “Mickey is going through the same thing I am” or especially, “Today I called a kid fat.” For Gubbins, one way that connection is made is through the careful construction of realistic teenage dialogue. For Howe and Guehring, the use of a multitude of characters who are bullied for a variety of different reasons allows a broader spectrum of ways to connect to the world of Paintbrush Falls.

The similarities between Addie’s successful endeavor to create a third political party and Jo’s successful effort in changing the girls’ dress code allow an easy parallel to be drawn between these two characters, but there is a plethora of ways in which the plays are alike. Both plays have scenes in which derogatory terms for gay people are spray painted on lockers; both plays intertwine locations in the school environment with scenes in the homes of the victims of
bullying; both plays show an attempt to improve an environment that has been tolerant of bullying, a success at Paintbrush Falls but not at St. Paul’s. But there is an additional and fundamental similarity between the two plays in terms of the underlying message that is being delivered, and it is a message that is not necessarily intended for either plays’ target audience. Looking at the ways in which these two plays reflect current Federal initiatives on bullying and violence prevention will make this message quite apparent.

The Misfits and fml: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life: Comparison with Federal Initiatives on Bullying

A playwright draws on memories, passions, and observations to create a work that will use the extraordinary power of the stage to evoke change. For Larry Kramer, the stage was a tool with which to draw much needed attention to the emerging AIDS epidemic. But Kramer also understood that his voice as a playwright must work in harmony with the larger society to produce the kind of sweeping changes necessary to save lives in the face of tremendous homophobia. Kramer would not be satisfied with simply increasing awareness within his own community. Success meant making waves on the national level. Like Kramer, playwrights Brian Guehring and Sarah Gubbins are responding to an issue with the goal of evoking national change and saving lives in the face of intolerance. A comparison of the ways our nation is responding to the dilemma of bullying and the approaches used by Guehring and Gubbins should provide deeper insight into these two playwrights and their work, while painting a larger picture of the ongoing epidemic.

In January 2014, the Department of Education issued Guiding Principles: A Resource Guide for Improving School Climate and Discipline in response to the various recommendations
made by The Federal Partners in Bullying Prevention, an interagency effort that works to coordinate policy, research, and communication on bullying topics. The Federal Partners include representatives from the U.S. Departments of Agriculture, Defense, Education, Health and Human Services, the Interior, and Justice, as well as the Federal Trade Commission, and the White House Initiative on Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders (Chandler).

*Guiding Principles* organizes their recommended guidelines into three basic principles. The first guiding principle focuses on using evidence–based strategies to create a positive school climate and encourages the use of prevention and intervention activities and services. In order to assist schools in adhering to this principle, the Department of Education recommends specific actions be taken, the first of which is to engage in deliberate efforts to produce a positive climate in the school: “Given the relationship between school climate and academic achievement, schools should take deliberate steps to create a positive school climate in which every student can learn, fully engage in a rigorous curriculum, and feel safe, nurtured, and welcome” (U.S. Department of Education 5).

In both plays examined in this chapter, the schools attended by our main characters have neglected to create a safe environment, even after being specifically requested to do so. Analysis of both plays indicates that, despite having a target audience of middle and high schoolers, the underlying message is actually aimed at the adults whose charge it is to nurture, educate, and protect these students. However, increasing awareness and expectations among the students regarding provisions that should be in place in the school system can be effective as well.
Both plays contain a scene in which graffiti is spray-painted on the locker of a student suspected to be gay. In *Misfits*, the word “faggot” is misspelled on Joe’s locker for all to see. Yet there is no mention of any reaction by the faculty to this event. Joe and his friends attend Ms. Wyman’s class directly after seeing the word, yet no action is taken by either the student or the teacher. An almost identical situation occurs in *fml: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life*, when Emma, Mickey, and Jo find the same word painted across Jo’s locker. The first action taken by Mickey is to find the custodial manager and have it washed off, rather than notify a teacher or the dean, which suggest both a lack of trust in the individual and/or lack of confidence in the system. The targeting of another student on the basis of their perceived sexuality is specifically addressed by the Department of Education’s Guidelines: “Schools should consider crafting goals covering the school’s provision of supports for all students, including students of color, students with disabilities, and students who may be at-risk for dropping out of school, trauma, social exclusion, or behavior incidents. Those with such risks include, but are not limited to, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students” (U.S. Department of Education 6). There seems no provision of support for at-risk students either at Paintbrush Falls Middle School or St. Paul’s. Most importantly, student requests for support are denied in both plays. The attempts by the Gang of Five in *The Misfits* to form a political party that would focus on minority students at the school is rejected by Principal Kellerman on the basis that, “A third party claiming to represent minorities is redundant at the very least and might justifiably be seen as promoting special rights.” The term “special rights” is a misnomer that implies additional rights for individuals that are members of specific groups. As Peter Rubin, a Professor of Law at Georgetown University, points out “The ‘special rights’ objection has been voiced most
strongly, but not exclusively, against laws that seek to prohibit discrimination on the basis of
sexual orientation. This line of attack has not always been effective, but it has achieved notable
success” (Rubin 564). A prime example of its usage was seen during the national debate on
whether marriage rights should be granted to same-sex couples, where those opposed argued
that allowing members of the same sex to marry would be granting them special rights.

Throughout The Misfits, there are moments where Bobby, the narrator, imagines the
difference between what the adult characters say and what they are actually thinking. During a
scene which takes place in Ms. Wyman’s class, there is a discussion about the upcoming dance.
The notorious bully, Kevin, calls out to Joe for the class to hear, “Got your dress picked out?”
Joe retorts and Ms. Wyman responds only with “Boys?” and Bobby interprets for the audience
that what she really means is, “I don’t have time for this, and I don’t know what else I can do to
stop you two from calling each other names” (Guehring, “The Misfits” 19). In the guidelines
issued by The Department of Education, the second principle addresses student behavior and
calls for clear and appropriate expectations and consequences: “A critical component of a
strong and positive school climate is a school-wide discipline policy that sets high expectations
for student behavior and provides a clear, appropriate, and consistent set of consequences for
misbehavior” (U.S. Department of Education 11). StopBullying.gov is the Federal government’s
information repository and comprehensive resource for issues involving bullying. It organizes
the research and recommendations of the nine government agencies that comprise the Federal
Partners in Bullying Prevention. Through StopBullying.gov, the Federal Partners recommend
that schools create policies and rules about student behavior: “Create a mission statement,
code of conduct, school-wide rules, and a bullying reporting system. These establish a climate in
which bullying is not acceptable” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, “StopBullying.gov”). Teachers and staff need to be trained on the school’s rules and policies.

Although Principal Kellerman may be considered a grouch, the Gang of Five understand that neither he nor Ms. Wyman support the name-calling that is prevalent in the school, but it is clear to the teenagers that the adults are not addressing the situation with appropriate action. The high expectations for student behavior which would benefit both students and faculty alike, have not been established. Ms. Wyman misses an ideal teaching moment by dismissing the name-calling in her classroom. In a discussion of student behavioral expectations, The Guiding Principles states: “While schools should make clear that bullying is unacceptable, schools should also use the disciplinary process not just to hold those who bully accountable, but also to help those students learn from their behaviors, grow, and succeed. In doing so, schools should consider the most effective ways to teach new social and emotional skills to students who bully in order to prevent future bullying” (U.S. Department of Education 12).

Fortunately, through the efforts of the Gang of Five, the climate at Paintbrush Falls Middle School is improved with the adoption of a “No Name-calling Week” and a more enlightened faculty. Sarah Gubbins does not grant us this same optimistic ending. Jo is beaten by a gang of boys inside the locker room of the school and hospitalized due to broken ribs which cause her to miss three weeks of school. In response, Mickey and Ms. Delaney attempt to start a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) at the Catholic school. Ms. Delaney is then fired for “irreconcilable differences” and although not stated implicitly, one can assume that this attempt did not improve her relationship with the St. Paul’s administration.
Acknowledging the increased risk of bullying that LGBT and LGBT-perceived youth are exposed to, StopBullying.gov recommends that schools create GSAs in order to provide a safer environment for students (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, “Bullying and LGBT Youth”). In a letter addressed to public school administrators across the nation, Former Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, wrote:

Gay-straight alliances (GSAs) and similar student-initiated groups addressing LGBT issues can play an important role in promoting safer schools and creating more welcoming learning environments. Nationwide, students are forming these groups in part to combat bullying and harassment of LGBT students and to promote understanding and respect in the school community. But in spite of the positive effect these groups can have in schools, some such groups have been unlawfully excluded from school grounds, prevented from forming, or denied access to school resources. (Duncan)

Gubbins has set her play at a Catholic high school, which would not be subject to the same regulations as public schools are, and therefore the decision to allow a GSA is up to the administration or board of directors. Thankfully, some Catholic schools now have GSAs, including Xavier High School in Manhattan. In a New York Times article published on the eve of the Pope’s visit to New York City in September 2015, Samuel Freeman wrote that, “Xavier’s embrace of its openly gay students comes amid the moderate, accepting tone that Pope Francis has struck about gay Catholics — most indelibly in his rhetorical question, ‘Who am I to judge?’”(Freedman).

As gay playwrights, Brian Guehring and Sarah Gubbins understand the unique obstacles that many LGBTQ students encounter, and they are directing blame for bullying and school-
related violence not on the bullies themselves or even on individual adults, but rather the collective environment that has been established within the schools.

Tackling the Relevant Issues In-depth: Gender and Bullying

When Emma discovers Jo’s locker has been spray-painted with the word “faggot,” her reaction is one of surprise. “But she’s a girl,” Emma exclaims to Mickey. She naïvely suggests that perhaps the vandalism was intended for him (Gubbins, *Fmt: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life* 41). There is the implication in the text that Emma believes this type of anonymous bullying only occurs between males. And there is evidence to indicate she is correct. Multiple studies suggest that boys are more likely to bully and be bullied (Nansel et al.) In addition, more than 60 per cent of girls who are bullied reported that they are mainly bullied by boys (Sullivan 21). In both *Fmt: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life* and *The Misfits* the bullies are male.

The manner in which girls and boys are victimized also tends to be different, with girls reporting less physical and verbal, but more indirect, victimization than boys (Owens, Daly, and Slee 8–9). A study conducted by Nicki R. Crick and Maureen Bigbee looked at gender differences in bullying by identifying relational victimization, or instances where peers threaten or harm the relationship with the victim (“I won’t like you if you don’t…”) as opposed to overt bullying, in which peers threaten to harm the victim physically (hitting, kicking, etc.). The results indicated that bullied boys were significantly more overtly victimized and girls were more relationally victimized (Crick and Bigbee 337–344).

But gender plays an additional role in bullying that is more significant to this inquiry. In part, Emma’s disbelief comes from the use of the word “faggot,” a term generally used by male bullies to taunt other males who they perceive as behaving in ways that are non-gender
conforming. Historically, the established social climate in public middle and high schools is one where normative identity and gender behavior are enforced through taunts, physical harassment, and forced isolation (Sullivan 51–52). In this environment, it is almost always the perception of physical characteristics and behaviors which are at odds with the perpetrator’s notions of normative gender roles that spark homophobic bullying, not the witnessing of the victim engaging in a homosexual relationship. Jo is never caught kissing another girl, nor is she even rumored to have. She does, however, play basketball and she is very good at it. The fact that she is physically attacked directly after a basketball game is likely an intentional statement on the part of Gubbins. She is punished for not adhering to gender expectations more so than the threat she poses as a possible romantic rival for Tyler. In *The Misfits*, the description Guehring gives us for (the other) Joe is “a creative, flamboyant, and confident boy who currently has a streak of pink in his hair” (Guehring, “The Misfits” 3). Flamboyant is an interesting word choice for Guehring to make, and although one might take issue with the cliché, it indicates something about how the actor playing Joe should physically behave, not which gender the character has a romantic attraction to, which is not a characteristic that is playable in and of itself.

But *The Misfits’* Joe is harassed for the same reasons as Jo in *fml: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life*: he is not conforming to his normative gender behavior. He is targeted more for his streak of pink hair than for his attraction to Colin. He is called fairy, girly-boy, and fag, this last being the most common derogatory name used in middle and high schools (Parsons 23).

Being gay is an invisible minority, as the Gang of Five point out during a discussion with DuShawn, who is a visible minority. Being effeminate, flamboyant, dressing counter to one’s
biological gender, and rejecting gender norms are traits or characteristics. A person with some or all of these characteristics might be homosexual, heterosexual, or bisexual. Just as a person without any of these characteristics might be homosexual, heterosexual, or bisexual. Our objective is to tear down the associations of gender and behavior, but this is an enormous undertaking since so much of our culture has been built on the notions of gender difference.

Elizabeth Meyer, the Associate Dean for Teacher Education at the University of Colorado, Boulder, observed in her study on gender and bullying that, “Questioning traditional notions of masculinity and femininity is like tearing down the walls of the house we grew up in. These are the values that we grew up with, the rules that we spent our childhood learning to follow and decode, and the history that all of our shared stories are embedded in” (Meyer 73).

**Tackling the Relevant Issues In-depth: GLSEN’S “No Name-Calling Week”**

In the climactic scene of Brian Guehring’s stage-adaptation of James Howe’s young adult novel, *The Misfits*, Bobby is convinced by the other members of the Gang of Five that he should be the one to give the election speech to the student assembly. Toward the end of the speech he says, “The No-Name Party wants to put an end to name-calling in school. We want to start with a No Name-Calling Day, in which we all think about the names we call each other and stop using them – just for a day.” The No-Name Party does not win the school government election; however Principal Kellerman and Ms. Wyman are so moved by Bobby’s speech that they establish a No Name-Calling Week at the school. “Bobby, until today I accepted kids calling each other names,” Kellerman tells the Gang of Five after the election. “I didn’t like it. I put a stop to it whenever I heard it, but for the most part I just shrugged it off as kids being kids,” he tells them (Guehring, “The Misfits” 66).
Today, “No Name-Calling Week” is held annually in thousands of schools across the country. Inspired by Howe’s popular novel, GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network), in partnership with Simon & Schuster Children’s Publishing, worked with over forty national partner organizations to create the event in 2004. The purpose of No Name-Calling week is to promote a dialogue about the effects of name-calling and bullying, and to find ways to reduce or eliminate them in schools. Although the name might imply a zero-tolerance approach, the event instead focuses on encouragement. Robert McGarry, Assistant Superintendent of Schools in the Holmdel, NJ district writes that, “Zero-tolerance policies are not the answer. Instead, GLSEN and its partners want children to realize that they can be as proud of being authentically "good" and "kind" as they can be of getting good grades” (McGarry).

Activities, such as poster-making, daily announcements, “random acts of kindness,” video screenings, and creative writing projects were developed by GLSEN for use by participating organizations. A nationwide survey conducted after the first year’s event found that, “Survey participants representing 413 schools throughout the nation reported that their schools participated in the No Name-Calling Week (NNCW) project. The majority of participating schools were public elementary and middle schools” (Kosciw, Diaz, et al.).

*The Misfits* and *fml: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life* represent two examples of how gay and lesbian playwrights are attempting to use the empathy inducing power of theatre to invoke a positive change in behavior among both young people and adults. For Guehring and Gubbins, reflection and representation are key to this change. As the characters on stage struggle under the weight of peer-victimization, those in the audience are forced to reflect on their role, past and present, in those similar situations they may have experienced.
Chapter Four
The Exploration Plays

The previous chapter looked at two plays that were written specifically for youth: teenagers and perhaps even preteens in the case of Guehrings’ *The Misfits*, and older teens in the example of Gubbins’ *fml: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life*. In both works, the audience views the events from the perspective of characters who are between the ages of twelve and seventeen and, although there are adult characters in both plays, there are no scenes that take place where at least one youth isn’t present. As a result, there is no unfiltered commentary on the state of the children or their actions. Young audiences watching a production of either play are encouraged by the dynamics of the work to maintain the perspective of the characters their own age. Because the young characters have little control over the environments they are required to occupy, they are forced to confront the adults to act on their behalf. Those adults exist in both the domestic and school environments, which mark the boundaries of the children’s lives. Although this safety net is quite frayed, as evidenced in the scene when Jo is attacked in *fml: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life*, it still provides some protection from the stresses and dangers of the adult world. This chapter examines two plays that look at what happens when that safety net is removed.

Beginning in 1995, Psychologist Jeffrey Jensen Arnet conducted a five-year study in which he interviewed 300 young people from across the nation about their lives and objectives. Several commonly repeated remarks immerged from these interviews, including an indication of feeling “in-between” – a term Arnet uses to describe the state where the struggles of adolescence were starting to recede as the youth began to take responsibility for their own
lives, yet parental bonds were still strong (Munsey). Arnett states that, “They are aware of being in a period of exploration, of not yet having made the choices that will provide the foundation for their adult lives, and this awareness makes them feel in-between, no longer in adolescence but not yet fully adult” (Arnett 48). The primary characters in Tarell Alvin McCraney’s Choir Boy and Christopher Shinn’s Teddy Ferrara are in that “period of exploration” as they leave the protection of their families and begin to establish their own identities. For the primary characters in both plays, inattentive adults are no longer the focus. When the net falls, the young people suddenly turn on each other. And the consequences can be dire.

**Choir Boy: About the Playwright**

2017 has been a very good year for Tarell Alvin McCraney. He has overcome a number of personal obstacles, not the least of which is his overwhelming shyness. “I was very shy. I am still very shy,” McCraney says of his life in the theatre, “The idea of being able to speak and say intimate things in a community atmosphere became engaging to me, became important to me” (MacArthur Foundation). Yet in late February of 2017, a golden Oscar in his hand, the six foot three shy man stood before an international television audience of millions: “This goes out to all those black and brown boys and girls and non-gender conforming who don’t see themselves.” McCraney continued, “We are trying to show you, you and us, so thank you, thank you, this is for you” (qtd. in Denham). Indeed, Moonlight’s vivid portrayal of a gay black youth is a rare occurrence in American cinema, and McCraney’s semi-autobiographical story reflects the existence of a group long neglected not just by Hollywood, but by the national consciousness. There are hints of McCraney’s upbringing in Miami’s Liberty City Neighborhood in the semi-autobiographical film Moonlight (2016). The screenplay was written by Barry Jenkins, adapted
from *In the Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue*, a manuscript that McCraney says was never a play but a project for drama school (Halperin). Specifically, McCraney wrote the piece as part of his application for Yale School of Drama’s playwriting program, but shelved it after gaining admittance. At Yale, fortune shined on him when he got a job as the assistant to August Wilson, who became his mentor (Brantley, “Realism of Dreams”). Jenkins, who grew up in the same Liberty City public housing development as McCraney – although the two never met – wanted the playwright to create a stage adaptation of the work, but McCraney became too busy after winning a prestigious MacArthur Genius grant in 2013 (Anderson). In July 2017, McCraney will take over as chairman of Yale’s playwriting program for a three-year term and will succeed Paula Vogel as playwright-in-residence at Yale Repertory Theatre (Barone).

Before the acclaim of *Moonlight*, McCraney was best known for the Brother/Sister Plays. McCraney wrote *The Brother’s Size*, which would become the second part of the trilogy, in 2007. *The Brother’s Size* transplants West African myths into the Bayou of Louisiana. The play seemingly explores sibling rivalry, although more than one critic has suspected that the three characters seen on the stage are really one (Brantley, “Realism of Dreams”). Even in this early work, McCraney’s skill at creating captivating rhythms though his dialogue was evident. As Jason Zinoman points out in his *New York Times* review, “It’s Mr. McCraney’s soulful monologues that provide the real harmony. Listen closely, and you might hear that thrilling sound that is one of the main reasons we go to the theatre, that beautiful music of a new voice” (Zinoman). In November 2009, *The Brother’s Size* was restaged at the Public as the second part of a trilogy, sandwiched between *In the Red and Brown Water* (2010), a play about
unfulfilled desires, and *Marcus, or the Secret of Sweet* (2011), which deals with sexual awakening (Marks).

In 2016, Phylicia Rashad starred as a raging and resentful matriarch in *Head of Passes*, a play in which McCraney slyly switches from what at first seems like a kitchen sink drama into a slightly absurdist, impressionistic style tragedy. The play was first produced by Steppenwolf, where McCraney is an ensemble member (Brantley, “Review: Head of Passes”).

McCraney has already defied critical expectations as he continues to be compared far more with Tony Kushner than with his mentor, Wilson, perhaps due to the inclusion of themes of gay sexual awakening in most of his works. But McCraney has already received grand comparisons to writers who are neither black nor gay. Ben Brantley wrote of The Brother/Sister plays, “Watching them, you experience the excited wonder that comes from witnessing something rare in the theatre: a new, authentically original vision. It’s what people must have felt during productions of the early works of Eugene O’Neill in the 1920s or of Sam Shepard in the 1960s” (Brantley, “Realism of Dreams”).

**Choir Boy: Production History**

Tarell Alvin McCraney served as the International Writer in Residence for the Royal Shakespeare Company from 2008-2010. McCraney credits Shakespeare’s plays as the inspiration for much of his own work. While on a flight to London to work on a production of *Coriolanus*, he began perusing his notes about the play and started to scratch out connections he was making with the characters. Before he knew it, he had forty-five pages of a new play that would later become *In the Red and Brown Water*, the first part of the Brother/Sister trilogy. In talking about his inspiration for *Choir Boy*, McCraney points to Shakespeare’s *Richard*
“For me, this very much hinged on Richard the Second’s journey and his sort of being on top, needing to stay on top, having to perform his way on top,” McCraney recalls, “and then having a sort of blustery and clearly king-like enemy in his midst who is also like a brother ... like a cousin to him, and then that reversal of having to take the fact that he can’t remain king and be who he his, because that is antithetical” (qtd. in K. Hall; “Choir Boy Study Guide”).

The Manhattan Theatre Club first presented Choir Boy as a co-production with Atlanta’s Alliance Theatre at City Center Stage II in New York City, opening on July 2, 2013. It received high critical acclaim and was given an extended run before moving to Atlanta (McCraney 2). The play has since been produced at the Studio Theatre in Washington D.C., Marin Theatre Company in Mill Valley, CA, The New Venture Theatre in New Orleans, and at several universities (Brasted; Kruger; Wren).

**Choir Boy: Analysis**

*Choir Boy* takes place at the Charles R. Drew Prep School, a fictional, all-male, historically African-America school that, throughout the course of the play, is celebrating the 50th anniversary of its founding. The school’s namesake is the real-life prominent African-American physician whose research led to the development of the large-scale blood banks used in the military that saved the lives of thousands of allied troops. Charles Drew was also known for objecting to the racial segregation of blood donations, which led to his resignation from the Red Cross in protest of this scientifically invalid practice (Hoover 837–838).

The current headmaster at the Charles R. Drew Preparatory School for Boys, Headmaster Marrow, is the youngest the school has ever known. But Headmaster Marrow’s firm yet fair leadership style earns him the respect of the boys he watches over. He is dedicated
to maintaining the school’s traditions and its strong reputation as an institution that builds both character and knowledge. The only other adult character, Mr. Pendleton, is a former professor at the school and the only character in the play who is not a person of color. He has come out of semi-retirement to teach a creative thinking class for the boys.

Pharus Jonathan Young is the effeminate, dazzlingly intelligent, and highly perceptive figure at the center of Choir Boy. Pharus is also ambitious, outspoken, and has a strong desire to prove himself, which can be a bit off-putting to some of his fellow Drew students. Pharus has a magnificent tenor singing voice - “a gift” as it is referred to by the headmaster – and he knows it. The play begins at the very end of his junior year and he has just been selected as next year’s lead boy for the school’s famous choir. The choir has found itself without a faculty sponsor since the former sponsor, Ms. Jamison, is on leave to have a baby. Pharus is given charge of the choir until a new faculty sponsor can be appointed. At the start of the play, Pharus has been given the honor of singing the school song, “Trust and Obey,” at the commencement ceremony for the class graduating a year ahead of him. But it is important to him that he is selected to sing it again next year so that he can achieve his goal of becoming, “The first Drew boy in history to sing a commencement twice” (17). Pharus is gay and, although he never denies this fact, it is something he discusses only with his roommate and the headmaster. “Pharus” is the Greek word for beacon or lighthouse (“Choir Boy Study Guide” 8).

There are four other boys in the school’s choir, at least that is how many are seen performing on stage. They are all juniors at the start of the play. Anthony Justin James, or “AJ,” is Pharus’ roommate and close friend. AJ is athletic and plays on the school’s baseball team. Back at home, he has a brother who is homophobic, but AJ himself is quite comfortable around
Pharus, even with Pharus’ occasional flirtatious remarks about how attractive AJ is. Bobby Marrow is the nephew of the headmaster, a situation that is generally beneficial for him, but sometimes brings unwanted attention as he tries to blend in with the others. Bobby is divisive, homophobic, and resentful of Pharus’ leadership which leads to Pharus removing him from the choir. Junior Davis is a close friend of Bobby’s, but would prefer to avoid getting in the middle of Bobby’s conflict with Pharus. David Heard, like many of the students at Drew, is there on scholarship, which he is fearful of losing. Not only is David’s family poor, but they are less supportive of their son than the other boys’ families are of their sons. In one instance, David’s family refuses to accept the charges when he attempts to call home. David has spouted homophobic remarks to Pharus in the past, but has recently “found the lord” and apologized. He is preparing to enter seminary and become a pastor.

*Choir Boy* is a play about power and honor. The intrusion of stasis, which sets the play in motion, revolves around this duality. The play opens at the graduation ceremony for the class a year ahead of our primary characters, with the Headmaster introducing Pharus who has been selected to sing the school song, “Trust and Obey” (7). After singing a few verses at the graduation ceremony, Pharus suddenly stops and looks behind him. The scene ends. Later, it is revealed that Bobby, as part of the choir assembled behind Pharus, whispered to Pharus while he was singing, “Sissy. Dis sissy. Dis faggot ass nigga” (18). Afterwards, upset that Pharus stopped singing in the middle of an honored tradition, the headmaster calls Pharus into his office. Although Pharus mentions that he was distracted, he refuses to name the culprit, since, “a Drew man doesn’t tell on his brother” is “a sacred rule that we all live by” (11,14). It is later revealed by the headmaster that this rule was entirely made up by the students themselves.
Bobby’s antagonizing whispers are the intrusion that breaks stasis and spurs the succession of events that shape the play. Only when the series of triggers and heaps are analyzed by looking at events of the play in reverse do we see McCraney’s true objective: to question the nature of bullying and the motivations that often lie behind it. In *Choir Boy*, McCraney demonstrates an impressive ability to create tensions that propel his audience toward a seemingly inevitable conflict that never comes to pass. Like a good mystery, we are misled. Yet this red herring yields to an ultimately satisfying finale.

Bobby, having been questioned about his part in the ceremony hijinks by his uncle, the headmaster, accuses Pharus of snitching. A shouting match ensues at the choir’s first rehearsal of the new school year and, in a moment of righteous anger, Pharus informs Bobby that he is out of the choir. A few months later, Headmaster Marrow confronts Pharus about kicking Bobby out and threatens to take away his position as lead of the choir. It is only at this point that Pharus reveals that Bobby called him a homophobic slur. The headmaster allows Pharus to remain lead but asks Pendleton, the newly arrived professor, to serve as faculty sponsor so that there is some supervision of the group. He also insists that Bobby be allowed to return to the choir, which leads to continued tension between Pharus and Bobby.

At the midpoint of the action, we find Pharus in the shower talking to another boy who remains unseen and unheard. Pharus is being flirtatious, perhaps even sexually aggressive, toward the individual who we assume is also showering: “You know I like standing by you. And sometimes you like it too. Can I … Shall I stand a little closer? … You tell me when” (46). As Pharus moves toward his shower partner, Junior suddenly walks in. The unseen person punches Pharus in the face and Pharus falls to the floor. This event is followed by a series of scenes in
which the headmaster grills each of the boys to find the person who threw the punch. The setup itself is somewhat cliché - an attack by an unseen assailant followed by a string of interrogations by a person of authority. But as Agatha Christie and Tarell McCraney are both aware, this situation forces the audience to question their own assumptions about each of the characters.

When the events of the plot are examined in reverse, as Ball recommends, the play’s structure reveals a conscious effort to “hide in plain sight” the relationship that is really at the heart of the play: in the end, it is revealed that David has been in love with Pharus, and the two have been together sexually several times over the course of the year. David has been struggling with his sexual identity, and this guilt has manifested itself as religious conviction and reinforced his desire to become a pastor. When Junior entered the shower, David’s fear of someone discovering his true nature caused him to strike out at the only person he has ever loved.

While the plot is grounded in earthly passions and antagonisms, Choir Boy reaches heavenly heights through the use of time-honored spirituals – eight in all, including “Trust and Obey” – that both compliment and offset the action of the play. For example, a scene where each of the boys is calling home is intertwined with their rendition of “Rockin’ Jerusalem.” “Rocking in the land and ringing them bells,” they proclaim as one after another connects with their families for the only time in the play. The musical highpoint is “Motherless Child,” sung as the students shower and prepare for bed (versions of several different Choir Boy casts performing “Motherless Child” and some of the other spirituals can be seen on YouTube). In almost every instance, the spirituals are performed by all five boys and the effect of these
beautiful voices, often singing in harmony, offsets the disagreements and frictions we experience in the encompassing scenes. The spirituals provide interludes of reflection and commentary the same way Jo’s graphic novel does in Gubbins’ *fml: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life*. In listening to these powerful voices raised together singing verses like, “Keep your eyes on the prize. Hold on, hold on,” one can’t help but hope the singers will learn the lesson of the songs (19–20).

In *Choir Boy*, spirituals also become the subject of debate and a point of contention that firmly establishes the necessary tension before the shower-punch scene. Mr. Pendleton has asked the students to bring in, “A theory, a well-known theory, and challenge it” (22). In class, Pharus tells how when he was younger his grandmother told him that there were hidden messages in the spirituals that would guide escaped slaves to freedom, messages about the geography, the safest routes to traverse, or places to hide out. But Pharus now rejects this idea, and says the power of the songs comes forth in their ability to inspire, not as some subliminal map guiding slaves north. “And I know some would condemn me for saying thus and breaking a long tradition of faith that we were creative enough, strong enough, to rebel even i’ th’ music that did oppress us,” Pharus tells the class, “But the rhythm and the joy and the spiritual uplifting that the music made, makes still, well; that is proof. That strength; that is the rebellion” (28). But Bobby believes in the traditional idea of the hidden messages and the two students begin to quarrel. Pharus proves himself a far better debater, and a frustrated Bobby storms out of the classroom.

In a conversation after the classroom debacle, Bobby warns David to be wary of Pharus. He is critical of Pharus’ view on spirituals and his questioning of tradition. “He coming in here
and talking about our music, our way and making it ... Making it extra! ...Calling our people liars,” Bobby vents, “And they letting him. They allowing it. Ain’t no way this near right” (32).

With this statement, Bobby illustrates a possible race-power dynamic that is occurring in Pendleton’s classroom. By referring to the songs and traditions as our songs, our traditions, Bobby may be inferring that Pharus does not belong to the category of Black Americans; that his effeminate manner and his limp wrist, sets him outside the classification of what it means to be a black man. When Bobby complains, “They lettin’ him,” he is referring to Professor Pendleton, who McCraney specifically states is white. This is authority that Bobby fears is allowing a transgression against African-American tradition. At this point in the play, we know little about Pendleton. What we do know is that upon arriving late to his introductory meeting with the students, he made the comment, “See it’s not just black people who are late.” Pendleton follows this with an attempt at humor around the idea of “CPT” (colored people’s time) (21). It is impossible to deny the racist implications McCraney is making about the character in this moment. Yet McCraney is again playing with the idea of false appearances and quick judgements, a major motif of the play. Later, while scolding his nephew, the headmaster says of Pendleton, “Do you know that man marched with Dr. King and sat in more sit ins than you have years of life and you sitting your silly ass in front of him spouting off like Kanye at a press conference!” (50).

It is also possible – and this is the appeal of being able to find dual interpretations in a well-crafted play – that Bobby is inferring that “tradition” belongs to heterosexuals. In this case, Bobby is referring to African-American tradition which, like many traditions worldwide, contains elements that clearly delineate the feminine from the masculinity. As Elizabeth Meyer mentions
in concluding her examination of gender and bullying, the notions of masculinity and femininity are imbedded in our collective histories and stories: “They are familiar. It is what we know. They are so familiar that they have become invisible and are not talked about or reexamined” (Meyer 73–74). The traditions and stories of our culture often make no mention of the existence of people who are not cis-gendered heterosexuals. The effect of this absence of representation leads to the mistaken notion that the presence of LGBTQ people is a relatively recent phenomenon, and therefore an intrusion and something that can be rolled-back. This lack of visibility in the histories and traditions of the culture serves to foster heteronormativity, which Lance Smith and Richard Shinn, in their study on racial oppression and heteronormativity, define as a paradigm that, “underscores the invisible and ubiquitous nature of the cultural messages and institutional policies that perpetuate heterosexual supremacy. The pervasiveness of heteronormativity veils from our awareness the insidious assumption that heterosexuality is superior and, therefore, the preferred way of being in the world” (Smith and Shin 1460). Bobby’s homophobia is apparent from the beginning, but his objection is not just that an effeminate and gay-perceived student is leading the choir: “He changing shit and getting bold,” Bobby tells David. It seems to be the fact that Pharus is outspoken and unyielding that bothers Bobby most. He has that expectation that a gay or effeminate male should be subservient or at least passive, since he feels that being gay is “less than” being straight and something to be ashamed of.

Bobby and David are not the only characters that exhibit homophobic tendencies. There are two instances where Headmaster Marrow mentions Pharus’ wrist during a private conversation with him. The text indicates the first instance only through stage directions that
run concurrently with the dialogue: *Pharus’ wrist goes limp. Headmaster looks at and corrects Pharus’ limp wrist* (10). In a later conversation, where Pharus’ position as lead boy is in jeopardy, Headmaster Marrow lightly snaps, “Pharus, your wrist!” To which Pharus cleverly responds by asking if his wrist is the reason why he might lose his position (26). This is a bit of complexity that McCraney adds to the character of the headmaster, who has otherwise been protective of Pharus and condemns gay slurs. It is a moment that gives us a glimmer of what Pharus’ life outside of Drew might be like, where his sense of gesture and “way of being in the world” are questioned even by those who support him. It also helps McCraney define the physicality of the character, while demonstrating societal resistance to connecting femininity and power.

The spirituals lift us up through their rhythms and harmonies and connect the story to a larger sense of struggle that is both historical and divine. But between, and sometimes on top of these harmonies, McCraney’s dialogue either continues or purposely disrupts the rhythm. The students address each other in a style that alternates between moments of ministerial praise, gentle prose, and language that is direct but rarely prosaic. The illusion of realism is created through dialogue that is never truly realistic. McCraney communicates the rhythm of speeches and exchanges through visual cues on the page. For example, a blank line indicates a pause, and much of the dialogue is written with midsentence returns followed by capitalized words:

PHARUS. Welcome back, Welcome back everybody. This is the day the Lord hath made …
C’mon on y’all rejoice and be glad!
Take these, sit, arrange yourselves in order of Tenor Baritone Bass. The first rehearsal Of the Charles Drew Chorus is about to begin. (12)
This format also allows readers to engage in the playwright’s intentionally quick pace by not having the flow of the dialogue interrupted with written instructions such as (pause).

Structurally, the scenes are short and briskly paced, propelled by the momentum of the gospel songs, except for the scenes at night in the dorm room between Pharus and AJ, which contain the most intimate and honest moments in the piece.

Teddy Ferrara: About the Playwright

“I wouldn’t expect politicians to help us process deep trauma. I wouldn’t expect movies and TV really to do it. The potential for the deepest exploration of this stuff is through the less popular arts,” remarked Christopher Shinn, “where there’s less profit to be made, there’s more freedom. I’ve certainly felt that freedom”(Frank and Eilfing). Shinn uses the freedom he feels in the theatre to make hard, dangerous choices. He provokes by defying expectation and presenting plays that refuse to take sides, and in doing so he inflames the sensibilities of his audience. The effect of watching a Christopher Shinn play is that you leave the theatre eager to debate, to claim perspectives that hadn’t even entered your consciousness hours earlier but now suddenly feel imperative, and to answer questions left frustratingly abandoned on the stage.

The notion of facing difficult truths, both personal and political, have characterized Shinn’s plays since his undergraduate work at New York University, where he was mentored by Tony Kushner (Weinert-Kendt). Shinn grew up a short distance from Connecticut’s esteemed Hartford Stage and was encouraged to engage in the theatre by his mother (Raden). His first full-length play, Four, was written in 1996, at a time Shinn recalls as being “in the midst of a troubled first love”(Shinn, Where Do We Live and Other Plays ix) and Other People (1998) while
experiencing heartache at the end of this relationship. Both plays were first produced at The Royal Court Theatre in London before multiple stagings in New York with the Manhattan Theatre Club, Playwrights Horizon, and other companies (Brantley, “The Desolation of Desire, Divided by Four”). Shinn won an Obie Award and a GLAAD Media Award for *Where Do We Live* (2005) which he directed Off-Broadway at the Vineyard Theatre (Bacalzo). His next work, *Dying City* (2007), which opened at Lincoln Center after premiering at The Royal Court Theatre, was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in Drama (Raden). *Now and Then* (2008), about the gay son of a U.S. presidential candidate, opened at the Huntington Theatre Company in Boston after premiering at The Royal Court.

**Teddy Ferrara: Production History**

In February 2012, the Goodman Theatre in Chicago produced Shinn’s play, *Teddy Ferrara*, which tells the story of a young university student who commits suicide. Shinn was inspired to write the play by the real-life suicide of Rutgers University student Tyler Clementi in September 2010. Tyler jumped off the George Washington Bridge after discovering that his dormitory roommate had secretly used his webcam to record him kissing a man. The roommate, Dharun Ravi, viewed the incident via a remote connection in another dorm room occupied by his friend, Molly Wei. Ravi later invited others, via a post to his Twitter account, to witness a subsequent rendezvous Tyler had with the man. Tyler, who had been open about his sexuality with his roommate, discovered the posts and two days later jumped off the bridge after posting a final message of his own on Facebook, which simply read, “Jumping off the GW Bridge sorry” (Parker; Pilkington; Zernike, “Tyler Clementi’s Parents Work With Rutgers Through New Center”).
“Tyler Clementi’s suicide came during a time when there seemed to be increased media focus on bullying and suicide among LGBTQ youth,” Shinn recalls, “and I started thinking about beginning a play about this subject then” (qtd. in S. Jones). This national focus resulted in an exploration of the angst he had felt in his own youth, particularly his time in college when he began his first intimate relationship with another boy (Healy, “For Christopher Shinn, Confronting Death Brings a New Play to Life”). Shinn had already been contemplating the idea of responding to *The Laramie Project* through his own work, as he felt frustrated that Kaufman’s play about Mathew Shepherd left out both the victim and the idea of sexual desire. Reading about Clementi’s suicide, he felt that desire and its connection to self-destruction were being overlooked in the national discussion, which focused only on the homophobia of the perpetrator. “I became determined to write a play that dramatized these issues with characters who could be explored in all their deep human complexity,” Shinn said, “It angered me that denial and sentimentalization were replacing the serious thinking our culture needed to be doing” (qtd. in S. Jones). Shinn began extensive research on the facts surrounding Tyler’s suicide, including tracking down posts Tyler had made on a gay forum called Justusboys. “I remember doing a lot of research,” said Shinn, “The Justusboys stuff in particular I remember feeling like a real breakthrough because it so clearly gave a sense of Tyler Clementi’s psyche and cultural surround.” (Shinn, Personal interview). Psyche is very important to Shinn, who is a strong advocate of psychotherapy, something he recommends for all beginning playwrights (Rathje).
**Teddy Ferrara: Analysis**

While Shinn conducted an extensive investigation into the events surrounding the suicide of Tyler Clementi, Tyler’s storyline is not the focus of Shinn’s narrative. Instead it primarily serves as a device that the play’s other characters, all of Shinn’s own creation, respond to. However, understanding Tyler’s psyche and inherent nature as Shinn was developing the play’s titular character based on Tyler was vital. “I think once I had a basic sense of him, I put everything aside and just wrote intuitively and imaginatively” (Shinn, Personal interview). The result is a fictional world that genuinely reflects on the complex nature of a very real tragedy. This approach enables Shinn to do more than just present a dry staging of events as lifted from the headlines. What seems to be of fundamental importance to Shinn is the emotional and political impact on both the gay students and the world beyond the walls of the university after Teddy’s suicide, which occurs toward the end of the third of the play’s five acts.

Shinn indicates the setting is a large university campus in the Northeast. This lack of specificity frees him from the expectations of a docudrama. The events which unfold on the campus are primarily seen from the perspective of Gabe, whose own romantic encounters and sense of self are placed at the heart of the play. Gabe is politically active and is considering running for student body president. While many of the students at the university come from wealthy families, Gabe does not, and has had to work part-time during his first three years. Gabe’s brief encounters with the awkward and shy Teddy and his reaction to Teddy’s suicide, like the reactions of most of the characters, are complex. Gabe confronts his own guilt while also questioning the victim mentality that seems to be pervasive at the university. Gabe desires an honest discussion of the situation that goes beyond vigils, shrines, and finger pointing, one
where the victim’s motives and mental state can be questioned along with that of the bully.

Gabe has a strong desire to establish a resilient LGBTQ community at the university, but receives little support from the school or his friends.

There are no angels in *Teddy Ferrara*. Each of the characters takes a disappointing action at some point, which may frustrate those who desire more heroic protagonists. Drew is Gabe’s new boyfriend and editor of the school’s newspaper. Drew comes from a wealthy family and does not share Gabe’s desire to create a stronger sense of community amongst the LGBTQ students. The play opens with Gabe and Drew cleaning up after a rather disappointing meeting of a gay student organization that Gabe leads. “Queer students want to spend their time being queer, not in a Queer Students group,” Drew tells Gabe (*Teddy Ferrara* 7). The statement itself touches on the issue of action versus identity, and whether being gay is something that you do or something that you are; an inane question to be sure, but one that evokes the insecurities and burgeoning intellects of college undergraduates. We eventually find that Drew is severely homophobic and particularly despises effeminate gay men, who he believes give all gays a bad reputation. “The world is changing,” Drew argues, “Being gay is not just some silly little effeminate, queer, faggoty thing anymore –” (*Teddy Ferrara* 80). Shinn does not shy away from examining the conflicting forces at work within this gay male subculture and allows his audience to contemplate an array of reasons for Teddy’s suicide, including rejection from factions within the LGBTQ community.

Drew is jealous of Gabe’s relationship with his close friend, Tim, the former student body president. Tim has decided not to run again this year, which inspires Gabe to take the opportunity to launch his own campaign. Tim is straight, although this identity becomes blurred
when Drew, during a break up period with Gabe, easily seduces him. Shinn uses this moment to demonstrate his own thinking on the fluidity of human sexuality:

I think it should be clear by now that sexuality is not primarily genetic or otherwise structured by our biology in a fixed way. My prediction is pretty simple: as homosexuality becomes more and more culturally acceptable, more and more people will have homosexual experiences. This will increase the possibility that some who are threatened by a more fluid sexuality will react with anger towards those who are embracing a more wide ranging sexuality. (qtd. in ReCupido)

Tim has a longtime girlfriend, Jenny, who he has been contemplating cheating on with another female student for a while. In fact, romantic and sexual betrayals are common in Teddy Ferrara. During this same break in his relationship with Drew, Gabe has a brief affair with Nicky, a male friend of Drew’s and reporter for the school newspaper who writes an article about Teddy after his suicide. Drew encourages Nicky to shape the article so that the university and Teddy’s roommate seem clearly to blame, while validating Teddy’s actions as reasonable in the face of such a horrifying invasion of privacy and public humiliation. But Nicky wants to present additional facts about Teddy, which Drew feels may cloud public opinion. Nicky has discovered that Teddy would often perform masturbatory acts for anonymous viewers on a webcam internet site. Nicky feels this information would paint a more complex and revealing portrait of Teddy’s frame of mind, allowing the reader to make their own decisions about the incident. This echoes Shinn’s own approach in crafting Teddy Ferrara, in which conflicting perspectives are all presented as reasonable possibilities.
Like the previous works we have examined, *Teddy Ferrara* presents adult characters in positions of authority. The University President is a former politician who is contemplating a run for the Senate. He finds himself amid controversy when the school newspaper writes that a student who committed suicide last year, by jumping from the library balcony, was gay. The Provost encourages the President to meet with the university’s Social Justice Committee, which until recently was called the Diversity Committee. The Provost explains that they renamed themselves because: “They felt the name was too ocular. ... Just because you see a lot of people of color and women and gays in a room - it doesn't necessarily mean anything. What matters are the values they are advocating for” (*Teddy Ferrara* 11). The President is well-meaning in his attempt to create an inclusive and safe university environment, but his ignorance of the struggles that non-cisgender, non-heteronormative, and differently-abled students experience is called out by Ellen, the committee’s chair:

> I understand your point, but I am reading papers from my students and it’s not an existential dilemma causing them to commit suicide. It’s the structural oppression they are facing at every level of university life – in dorms, in classrooms, in public spaces. (*Teddy Ferrara* 35)

Teddy is the intrusion that shatters stasis in the play. But, as with the other works examined in this exploration, that stasis is an uneasy and precarious one. The previous year saw the suicide of a highly popular student and the university is still coming to grips with the political and social implications of this tragedy when the school newspaper reports that the student was gay, albeit closeted. Gabe has organized a new Queer Student group but is lamenting the low turnout. The socially awkward and painfully shy Teddy arrives after the group’s first meeting, having misread the starting time. Gabe makes some attempt to welcome him and promises to add him on
Facebook, a promise he fails to keep. Teddy explains that stress has caused him to break out in canker sores around his mouth, making it slightly difficult to talk. He also mentions that his roommate is “weird” about him being gay, which concerns Gabe. Teddy then exits, after which Drew comments, “what a weirdo” (*Teddy Ferrara 8*).

With the exception of two scenes in which the character is alone in his dorm room, and a scene on the library balcony right before he jumps, Teddy floats in and out of the play like a sorrowful apparition. Our frustration mounts as Teddy’s awkward attempts to connect with others continually fail. If we look at how Shinn shaped the play through the series of triggers and heaps leading up to Teddy’s jump, we begin to realize what Shinn is truly exploring: human complexity. We may become angry at the lack of empathy Teddy receives from the people around him, particularly other gay males, but Shinn forces us to turn that anger inward and ask ourselves if we would have behaved any differently. Would we have had the patience and compassion to stay, listen, and truly hear Teddy’s cries for help buried deep in the socially awkward bits of tongue-tied conversation and uncomfortably intrusive questions? Unlike the characters, we are aware (if we have read anything about the play beforehand) that the story reflects the events surrounding Tyler Clementi, and we therefore know Teddy’s fate. The play makes us question our own sense of empathy with those we encounter in our daily lives. Are we accountable for every interaction we have with those with whom we share the planet?

Like Gubbins’ *fml: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life*, the true villain of the story never appears onstage. We overhear Teddy on his webcam explaining to the voyeurs watching that he has discovered that his roommate has secretly videotaped a sexual encounter he had with a man in his dorm room. Teddy had asked his roommate if he could have the room to
himself for two hours for his date, and the roommate agreed, but secretly pointed his computer’s camera toward Teddy’s bed and then watched the action via a remote device in a friend’s room in the same dormitory. Teddy found this out after discovering Facebook and Twitter posts by the roommate describing the event. Comments connected with the post made by the roommate’s friends about Teddy included disparaging and homophobic remarks. These events mirror the facts of the Tyler Clementi case.

David Ball reminds us that the purpose of a play is not to express theme. “Investigation of theme, a poem’s or a play’s, is not an attempt to discover what the work means. A play doesn’t mean anything. It is.” Ball continues, “Artistic expression is meaning in and of itself. It doesn’t translate or decode or puzzle or compute into anything but itself” [Emphasis in the original] (Ball 76). This is particularly true for Shinn’s works that are written to provoke, not provide. Nonetheless, several recurrent themes permeate *Teddy Ferrara*.

There is an ongoing desire on the part of many of the gay student characters to develop a sense of community, and yet they encounter often mundane obstacles which prevent them from taking much action. This lack of community results in isolation and the insecurities that come with developing a sense of adult identity on one’s own. Shinn never shies from portraying the reality of these insecurities, even at the expense of artful dialogue and cohesive rhythms. Teddy’s leap from the highest balcony of the school’s library provides the unfortunate catalyst that finally forms this community.

In an odd juxtaposition, we might attribute this initial lack of community to the extraordinary activism seen in the gay communities of older and past generations, whose accomplishments in providing equality and dignity were so successful that they may have lulled
the younger generations, who have grown up with LGBTQ issues at the forefront of the nation’s sociopolitical discourse, into a sense of complacency. The ferocious anger of Larry Kramer’s characters in *The Normal Heart* or the passionate convictions of Tony Kushner’s abandoned acolytes are not seen in most of Shinn’s young flock. The exception is a transgender student who interrupts the student body presidential assembly, ACT-UP style, by shouting down the president with calls of “Fight for Teddy! His voice is ours – our voice is his!” infuriating the president who then tears the student’s megaphone away causing the assembly to break into chaos (*Teddy Ferrara* 72–73). But this is the exception in a youthful crowd that fails to acknowledge the source of their privilege and rights.

Critical response to the Goodman production was mixed. Charles Isherwood of *The New York Times* remarked that, “Mr. Shinn clearly doesn’t want ‘Teddy Ferrara’ to be perceived as a finger-wagging tract about the bullying of gay youth. But in trying to draw fully realized portraits of at least a half-dozen young men (gay, straight and still wondering) caught up in the agonizing search for a comfortable sexual identity — not to mention love — Mr. Shinn has stretched his considerable gifts a little far, resulting in a drama populated by characters that feel incomplete or blurrily drawn” (Isherwood). Chris Jones, in his review for the *Chicago Tribune*, similarly commented that, “One of the problems with plays dominated by collegiate sexuality — and there is no shortage of graphic undergraduate sex in Christopher Shinn’s ‘Teddy Ferrara’ — is that if you are a few years removed from that particular time of life you tend to watch such dramas cringing at the memory of your own behavior; you're just one step from shouting out to the nicer characters some version of the line favored by the great sexologist Dan Savage: ‘It gets better!’ ” (C. Jones, “Shinn’s ‘Teddy Ferrara’ Stuck on Campus”).
These reactions seem understandable given Shinn’s intent to realistically duplicate the banality of the undergraduate set’s lingo along with the complexity of the characters’ search to establish identity. These critics may be responding to Shinn’s decision to create characters that echo the often-contradictory nature of human desire, from the altruistic to the selfish, as well as his refusal to present clear answers.

_Choir Boy and Teddy Ferrara: Comparison with Federal Initiatives on Bullying_

By comparing the events of these plays with the Federal guidelines on bullying it is hoped that additional insights into the work will be revealed and discoveries might be made concerning how the setting the playwright has created supports, or fails to support, a safe environment for student characters in the play. This does not imply that these institutions, fictional or not, are completely or even partially to blame for the incidences of victimization or teen suicide at the center of the play. Examining these settings from this perspective merely enables us to understand how the surrounding culture has affected the bully-victim paradigm in our attempt to get to the heart of what the playwright is trying to say.

According to the Department of Education’s Guiding Principles, “Schools that foster positive school climates can help to engage all students in learning by preventing problem behaviors and intervening effectively to support struggling and at-risk students” (U.S. Department of Education 2). School climate is a much-discussed topic in both _Choir Boy_ and _Teddy Ferrara_, although from different institutional perspectives. In both cases, there seems to be an overriding concern on the part of the administration for the school’s reputation, which may not be the most benevolent of motivations, but this in and of itself does not negate the existence of genuine compassion.
The Charles R. Drew Prep school is both fictitious and private, and therefore not subject to Federal regulation. However, we are using these *Guiding Principles* purely as a lens to gain further insight into the environment of the school as created by the playwright. At the Charles R. Drew Prep School for Boys, the headmaster emphasizes that both tradition and honor play a strong part in the school’s culture. Those honors and traditions are expressed in codes of conduct, which include suspension—not expulsion—for any act of violence committed by the students. Because suspension results in the termination of any scholarship, for the students that come from less economically well-off families this means that they will no longer be able to attend the school. There is no leeway under this code, and despite Pharus’ pleas that David not be suspended, the assaulter departs at the end of the play with the likelihood that he will not be returning. This Charles R. Drew code both does and does not adhere to the Federal guidelines. On the one hand, adherence to the second principle is clearly in evidence: “Schools that have discipline policies or codes of conduct with clear, appropriate, and consistently applied expectations and consequences will help students improve behavior, increase engagement, and boost achievement” (U.S. Department of Education 11). However, the guidelines also discourage zero-tolerance policies, indicating that “research has shown that attempting to maintain order by unnecessarily relying on suspensions or expulsions for minor misbehaviors may undermine a school’s ability to help students improve behavior, fail to improve the safety or productivity of the school’s learning environment, and seriously and negatively impact individual and school-wide academic outcomes” (14). Deciding which behaviors are considered “minor” now comes into question. In the case presented in *Choir Boy*, David uses violence against Pharus because he fears the repercussions that the revelation of his
homosexuality will result in. This fear would be pacified in an environment that is more tolerant of non-heteronormative sexuality. Dismantling the heteronormative environment through initiatives that promote inclusivity should be a goal at the Charles R. Drew Prep School.

_Teddy Ferrara_ is the only play in our study where the bullying incident takes place at a university rather than a pre-college educational institution. While the Guiding Principles created by the Department of Education are focused primarily on traditional public schools, charter schools, and alternative schools, the suggestions for creating a more supportive learning environment are also useful for colleges and universities. At the start of _Teddy Ferrara_, the Provost is concerned about the school newspaper’s report that the student who committed suicide last term was gay. He believes this might lead some to believe that the climate at the university contributed in some way to his death (Shinn, _Teddy Ferrara_ 12). The Provost’s trepidation infers that opportunities arose for prevention and intervention that were neglected by the university, particularly opportunities to create a more supportive environment for LGBTQ students and other minorities. We see evidence that this is, indeed, the case in Gabe’s almost solitary effort to organize the Queer Student group and in the President’s initial rejection of the Diversity Committee’s ideas for improving campus culture – such as requiring that writers from minority groups be included on all syllabi. Analysis of the play – and the real-life event that inspired it – underscores that the simple act of inclusivity (in syllabi, at school dances and events, in the establishment of support groups, etc.) all serve to reduce homophobia and other forms of intolerance, and increase respect and empathy. In the play, the roommate’s act of secretly videotaping Teddy indicates not only disrespect, but a viewpoint that marks what Teddy was doing – engaging in a romantic encounter with another person – as
being so peculiar and abnormal that it was worthy of both filming and broadcasting. Teddy’s earlier remarks that his roommate is “freaked out I’m gay,” lend evidence that it is likely the roommate would not have spied on a Teddy had he been with a woman (Teddy Ferrara 10). This demonstrates the heteronormativity prevalent in the roommate’s value system, and that his viewpoint has not yet been questioned or successfully broadened by the culture and climate of the unnamed university he attends (Biegel 136). Federal Guidelines address the need for the training of all school personnel to engage students and support positive behavior, including addressing issues of cultural responsiveness and institutional bias. However, there is no mention of specific actions to reduce heteronormativity. While the guidelines list LGBTQ students as an at-risk group, teaching that non-heterosexual relationships should be equally valued and respected has met with resistance from certain districts across the nation (U.S. Department of Education 6–8; DeWitt). Nonetheless, the actions of the roommate meet the CDC’s definition of an indirect mode of a relational type of bullying described as: “Publicly writing derogatory comments, or posting embarrassing images in a physical or electronic space without the target youth’s permission or knowledge” (Gladden et al. 7). The invasion of privacy then resulted in the posting of malicious comments about the victim by friends of the roommate.

Tackling the Relevant Issues In-depth: Race and LGBTQ Bullying in Choir Boy and after all the terrible things I do

LGBTQ youth of color are often frustrated by the assumption that they have more in common with white LGBTQ youth than their ethnic or racial community (Jagose 63). In Choir Boy, we see this assumption in action as Bobby insinuates that Pharus is not a member of the
African-American community – that he is not entitled to lay claim to its heritage and traditions because he is “limp wristed” (McCraney 32). A study of lesbian and gay youth, race, and peer victimization concluded that: “The demand on LGB youth to choose one identity based on their sexual orientation, or another based on race was understood by key informants as rooted in community perceptions of race as heterosexualized and sexuality as race–less (i.e., white)” (Daley et al. 20). A. Rey Pamatmat, a Filipino-American playwright, whose work we shall explore in the following chapter, echoes these sentiments: “There’s the obstacle when you are a queer person of color and the only representation is white men. It makes you feel like you have to abandon your ethnicity in order to identify with your sexuality. But (gay people of color) have to reconcile their ethnicity with their faith as well as their sexuality” (Pamatmat, Personal interview). McCraney illustrates the tension between these two identities in the climactic scene at the end of the play, when Pharus talks with his roommate, AJ, about how barbershops in black neighborhoods are considered places where men can gather for discussion and debate and to create a sense of community. Pharus explains why he now refuses to go into barbershops: “I never felt right there. Never. Always felt like the last place I should be, and they made sure I knew it” (McCraney 57). He tells us that when he was 8 or 9, he and his straight-acting friend, Kevin, used to go to the barbershop together. But one time Kevin, who was well-liked by all the men in the shop, called Pharus a faggot and the men all laughed and nodded their heads in agreement. This story underscores the struggle Pharus and David have in claiming their black identity, which they are proud of, while attempting to come to terms with their own sexuality, which is sometimes rejected by segments of the black community. Black
gay youth have expressed feeling “betrayed” by their straight-perceived black peers who alienate or victimize them (Daley et al. 20).

Cultural homophobia refers to the social standards and norms that exist in a particular community which dictate that heterosexuality is better or more moral than nonheterosexuality (Veltman and Chaimowitz 1–7). Bullying associated with cultural homophobia often means that for LGBTQ youth who belong to minority racial/ethnic communities, the likelihood of being victimized by their cultural peer group is greater when compared to LGBTQ white youth. In addition, youth of color were described as having to struggle more because they must confront not only social homophobia, but homophobia associated with their culture and family. While many LGBTQ youth – regardless of race or ethnicity – face rejection by their families, in certain cultures, anti-gay sentiment runs stronger and youth within those communities may be unable to turn to their families for support in response to peer victimization due to fear of familial rejection (Daley et al. 20). In A. Rey Pamatmat’s after all the terrible things I do, explored in the next chapter, a Filipino-American boy turns to his family for support after experiencing a great deal of peer-victimization due to his effeminate nature, only to receive severe admonishment. Years after the boy’s suicide, his mother searches for a source to blame and begins to understand the influence her Filipino-Catholic upbringing had in contributing to his death (Pamatmat, “after all the terrible things I do” 8,10,51-54). In both after all the terrible things I do and Choir Boy, the victim is bullied due to his effeminate nature and the homophobia of the perpetrator and this motivation is never questioned. But for many LGBTQ youth of color, the reasons why they have been targeted for bullying – racism and/or homophobia - aren’t as clear cut (Daley et al. 19).
Tackling the Relevant Issues In-depth: Tyler Clementi, Teddy Ferrara, and Empathy

According to a 2008 study by Decety, Michalska, and Akitsuki at the University of Chicago, youth between the ages of seven and twelve are naturally inclined to feel empathy for others. In addition, the regions of the brain engaged in social interaction and moral reasoning were activated in the children who participated in this study when they witnessed animations of someone intentionally being hurt (Decety, Michalska, and Akitsuki). However, a study conducted by Gini, Pozzoli and Hauser, found that youth who bully tended to be deficient in moral compassion, despite being fully developed in other areas, including intellectual reasoning: “In essence, when it comes to engaging in morally appropriate behavior within peer relationships, the mind of a bully fails to access the knowledge they bring to bear on judgments of moral scenarios” (Gini, Pozzoli, and Hauser 607). There may be a connection between the lack of empathy and a continued failure in judgement regarding the recognition of morally inappropriate behavior found in the Gini study.

Absent from the stage in Christopher Shinn’s dramatization of the events of Tyler Clementi’s suicide is the character of “the roommate,” the manifestation of Dharun Ravi. When details surrounding Tyler’s death began to surface in the media, Ravi became the focus of the nation’s outrage (Parker). The two questions on the minds of many of those who followed the case revolved around the “why” and “how” of it all: Why would Ravi do this? And how could Ravi have done this? This first question seeks a straightforward motivation and the possible responses vary from thrill-seeking to curiosity to homophobia. But the second seeks to explore Ravi’s nature: what happened in Ravi’s consciousness that prevented any sense of empathy from developing for the person he was sharing a room with? Did the fact that Tyler was gay, a
detail known to Ravi, prevent him from establishing an empathetic relationship to his roommate? If the latter is the case, fear of the “other” might be the impetus for Ravi’s actions, rather than explicit homophobia. Sociologists Patricia Little and Marcia Marx discuss this fear in terms of empathy:

We learn to react negatively or indifferently to those unlike us, and, as a result, segregation by race, class, and sexual orientation persists. Because prejudice alienates people from the targets of their hostility, individuals make little effort to understand the people against whom they are prejudiced. Empathy and familiarity, therefore, are critical to breaking down the barriers of prejudicial thinking and the changing of attitudes. (Little and Marx 207)

In a wonderfully detailed exposé published in the New Yorker (February 2012), Ian Parker reveals the series of events that led up to Ravi’s court hearing on charges of invasion of privacy (sex crimes), bias intimidation (hate crimes), witness tampering, and evidence tampering. What is so stunning is how much can be revealed about what Ravi was thinking, not just in the days surrounding Tyler’s suicide, but even weeks before the two had met, when Ravi used the email that had been forwarded to him from Rutgers to research his future roommate. A discussion between Ravi and a high school friend about Ravi’s findings expose how Ravi felt about the idea of having a gay roommate and about gay people in general. Ravi instant messaged, “fuck my life / He’s gay,” to his friend, and the two then began a conversation about the misfortune of having a gay roommate. However, after continuing his personal online investigation of Tyler, he had also discovered that Tyler’s family was not wealthy. Ravi wrote to his friend, “Dude I hate poor people” (Parker). As a heterosexual athlete of color from a wealthy, immigrant family, Ravi was several rungs removed in the empathy radius from the homosexual, white musician from a
poor family. Still, had Tyler and Ravi been given more time, and a willingness to get to know each other and explore their differences, empathy would likely have developed along with familiarity, according to Little and Marx (Little and Marx 207–208). Unfortunately, the spying and broadcasting event occurred early in the school year, as is mirrored in *Teddy Ferrara*.

The peer-victimization that Teddy (and the real-life Tyler on which the character is based) experienced from his roommate is of a different nature than the bullying incidents that occurred in the other three works analyzed thus far, which amount to multiple instances of continuous name-calling and one act of physical violence. The impact on Tyler/Teddy was indirect in that he had to find the remarks made by his roommate and his roommate’s friends on the internet, which he then confirmed through his discovery that a computer camera was aimed at his bed. Yet the emotional affect was clearly devastating enough to make Tyler/Teddy feel like the only way to stop the pain was to take his own life.

In *Teddy Ferrara*, Christopher Shinn resists laying blame entirely on the unseen roommate. In fact, lack of empathy for Teddy seems to be an issue for most of the characters in the play, including the other gay male characters who comment often on Teddy’s social awkwardness and, in one instance, even reject a friendly self-introduction by just walking away. In many ways, Shinn’s play is an exploration of empathy in which the *bully* is not a single individual who is deficient in the cognitive ability to recognize morally inappropriate behavior in peer-relationships, but instead the *bullying* is the cumulative lack of compassion and patience experienced by an individual in need.
Chapter Five
The Reflection Plays

The last two plays to be analyzed in this exploration are written for adults and focus on adult characters looking back on their youth and their experiences with bullying. Ultimately, children rely on the systems implemented and regulated by adults for their education and safety. There are many initiatives aimed at children that focus on reducing bullying, including those that use theatre or theatrical activities. But plays written for adult audiences might also have a positive influence in reducing bullying and teen suicide, at least that is the hope of the two playwrights whose work is explored in this chapter. Adults reflecting back on their own childhood experience with school bullying can significantly improve the way they deal with bullying in the lives of their own children or students (Miehls 52,62). Dramatic works which encourage adults to reflect on their own experiences with peer-victimization – whether as victim, perpetrator, or bystander – can also inspire them to help change the climate at their children’s schools, which may ultimately ignite positive change in the current youth culture.

In the plays surveyed in this chapter, the long-term effects of bullying are examined, as well as the impact of teen suicide caused by bullying on both families, friends, and the perpetrators. For the first time in this investigation, the perspective of the bully is also examined. Both plays explored in this chapter present adult characters who are wrestling with the guilt of having verbally tormented a childhood peer who then committed suicide.
**after all the terrible things I do: About the Playwright**

A. Rey Pamatmat is the recipient of the Princess Grace Award for Playwriting, the Playwright of New York (PoNY) Fellowship, Princeton’s Hodder Fellowship, a Princess Grace Special Projects Grant, a NYFA Playwriting Fellowship, and a Truman Capote Literary Fellowship. Like McCraney, Pamatmat received his MFA in playwriting from the Yale School of Drama. His BFA in Drama is from New York University. Pamatmat is co-director of the Ma-Yi Writer’s Lab and teaches at Primary Stages’ Einhorn School of Performing Arts (Pamatmat, “Biography”).

While he is sometimes referred to as “that Filipino playwright,” even by his long-term collaborator Ralph B. Peña, who is currently Ma-Yi Theatre Company’s artistic director, Pamatmat was raised in the rural outskirts of Port Huron, Michigan (Evans; Szymkowicz; Pamatmat, Personal interview). The influence of his Filipino-American upbringing can be seen in most of his work, which often deals with ethnicity and identity. But Pamatmat refutes the idea that his plays can be categorized as “ethnic plays” since they speak of a distinctly American experience. He criticizes the notion that, “plays about bi- or tri-cultural experiences are ‘ethnic’ plays, when in reality they are truly American plays — America is still the only place where many of those plays could actually take place” (qtd. in Szymkowicz).

Pamatmat’s semi-autobiographical play, *Edith Can Shoot Things and Hit Them*, revolves around two young siblings left mostly on their own on an abandoned farm. It is his most successful work to date. *Edith Can Shoot Things and Hit Them* first premiered at the 2011 Humana Festival of New American Plays at the Actors Theatre of Louisville. It has since been continuously produced nationwide and has recently been anthologized. The play has
established Pammatmat’s reputation as a playwright at the forefront of the exploration of new American identities (Metzger and Clum; Evans).

*after all the terrible things I do: Production History*

Amid the unexpected success of *Edith Can Shoot Things and Hit Them*, Pammatmat began work on a play about the circumstances surrounding school bullying, particularly parental reaction to LGBT-perceived victimization. He had initially wanted to create a play about two adults who had both been bullies in their youth, but when Tyler Clementi’s suicide became national news, he was intrigued by the reaction of Tyler’s mother to the loss of her son and the publicity surrounding her son’s homosexuality. “I knew I wanted to write a play about two bullies,” he recalled, “and after Tyler Clementi (the media attention to his suicide), I kept thinking about his mother ... how she was not accepting of him ... but subtly. You had to read between the lines ... But I could tell she didn’t accept him being gay”¹ (Pamatmat, Personal interview).

Pamatmat also became fascinated with exploring the perpetrator’s motivation in the bully-victim dyad, a perspective overlooked in most dramatic works dealing with peer-victimization. He felt that presenting the viewpoint of an adult who had bullied when he was a

¹ There is evidence that Pammatmat is correct in his analysis of Tyler’s mother’s initial reaction. However, it should be noted that Jane Clementi has since become a strong advocate for the LGBTQ community and was instrumental in forming the Tyler Clementi Foundation, which advocates for LGBTQ youth (Zernike, “After Tyler Clementi’s Suicide, His Parents Make Painful Changes in the Search for Why”).
child would be unusual, perhaps even beneficial. “Everything that has been done in terms of fighting bullying was aimed at the victims and how we can help them and how they can help themselves,” he said, “There was nothing that addressed the bullies” (Pamatmat, Personal interview).

Pamatmat also has some reservations concerning Dan Savage’s “It Gets Better” project. While he acknowledges the program’s success in raising national awareness, Pamatmat suspects that the campaign doesn’t always apply its resources to those who need it most: “It seems to be mostly white men addressing primarily white suburban kids,” he says, “It is still leaving a lot of people out.” He also notes that the video campaign features only adults for whom things did “get better” but lacks any mention of those who are still struggling with the effects of peer-victimization in post-adolescence. While he is not suggesting an “It doesn’t get better” campaign, he does believe the program’s success has enabled it to broaden its focus to include adults experiencing bullying trauma (Pamatmat, Personal interview).

In discussing his inspiration for writing after all the terrible things I do, Pamatmat addressed an assumption many make about openly gay playwrights who write about bullying: “I was not bullied. Bullying is such a foreign thing to me” (Pamatmat, Personal interview). Like the lesbian and gay playwrights who wrote about AIDS, you needn’t be a direct victim to take up the mantle and express the angsts and anger that results from an oppressive force working against one’s community, friends and family.

after all the terrible things I do was commissioned by South Coast Rep, debuted at Milwaukee Rep in 2014, and continued at the Huntington Theatre in Boston and About Face Theatre Company in Chicago (Pamatmat, “Biography”).
after all the terrible things I do: Analysis

Playwright and theatre historian Jeffrey Sweet once wrote, “The need for a variety of voices and roles is particularly strong in two-character plays, when there usually is only one issue to be settled between the dramatic personae.” Sweet explains that, “Plays like The Gin Game and Same Time, Next Year would be tedious if their authors hadn’t figured out how to invest their limited casts with a variety of different sub-roles to put into contest against each other” (Sweet). In after all the terrible things I do, A. Rey Pamatmat presents us with two characters that each have a complex variety of roles to play. Linda is an immigrant from the Philippines, a devout Catholic, a grieving mother, and a bookstore manager. Daniel is an openly gay young writer, a recent college graduate, a native of the town, and is seeking a job at the bookstore. While the differences between Linda and Daniel are apparent at the onset of the story, their similarities are revealed gradually though Sophoclean revelations: they have both been the perpetrators of bullying, they both suffer from homophobia, and they are both desperately attempting to purge the guilt they have for past transgressions against people they loved.

The play begins in the middle of a job interview – an ideal dramatic setup for quick revelation of character and circumstance. Daniel is hoping to get a job at Books to the Sky, one of the few remaining independent bookstores, which has been owned and managed by Linda for many years. He has recently returned to this small, Midwestern town after receiving his degree in creative writing from the University of Iowa. He had spent his childhood in this town, even passing some afternoons in the bookstore, before his parents divorced when he was seven and his dad took him to live in Chicago. Daniel’s return to the town is the intrusion that
shatters the stasis in the play. That stasis revolves around Linda’s psychological state, specifically the guilt that she has carried since the suicide of her effeminate gay son, Isaac, four years ago. Before Daniel’s return, Linda had resigned herself to carrying this burden of guilt for the remainder of her life, keeping the painful memories of the hurtful things she said to her son after he turned to her for help. Guilt is also a reason for Daniel’s return to the town, as he is trying to escape an abusive relationship in which he was the abuser.

For Linda, the arrival of an openly gay young man, who would have been about the same age as her son had he lived, seems to present an opportunity to finally talk about Isaac and the circumstances surrounding his suicide. The two characters quickly identify their shared history, but as Daniel’s days working at the bookstore progress and the conversations become increasingly personal, the relationship unravels as they discover that their connection is deeper and more tragic than they had first realized. Instead of exorcising guilt, they cast blame.

For Pamatmat, this conflict between Linda and Daniel serves as a platform to explore his own questions about the nature of bullying and the motivations of those who victimize:

All of my plays usually start with confusion: something in the world doesn’t make sense to me, or two very different things seem related but I don’t know why or how. When that confusion crystallizes into a question, I start writing—writing for me is a search for answers and understanding. (qtd. in Shannon)

Like Pamatmat, the character of Daniel is searching for answers through his own writing. At the heart of after all the terrible things I do is Daniel’s novel, which tells the story of two men in a romantic relationship but who are having a difficult time shaking their shared past, in which one had verbally and physically bullied the other when they were teenagers. “One of them, Craig, was obviously gay when they were young and had a crush on Jason, who wasn’t as
comfortable,” Daniel explains to Linda as they open the bookstore, “And now they’re together, but when they were young there were hurtful... things that were said or done, and they... he hurt the ... maybe even damaged or caused Craig to ...” (“after all the terrible things I do” 29). He interrupts himself at this point to imply that the novel is a bit autobiographical, and Linda assumes that he is Craig in the story, the victim of bullying. Linda tells him, “For a long time, I wasn’t ready to talk and then when I am: here you are.” Later, Linda continues to make assumptions about Daniel’s novel. Linda says to Daniel, “I know the story isn’t strictly autobiographical, but parts of it are true. You understand what Isaac lived through, because you lived it, too” (“after all the terrible things I do” 39).

Linda begins to inquire about how Daniel came to realize that he was gay. “How did you know when you were just a kid what you were attracted to?” She asks him. But it becomes clear that she is really trying to learn about her own son and his experience of being bullied. Having heard the story of the novel Daniel is writing in which a young Craig is persecuted by the homophobic Jason, Linda eagerly seeks Daniel’s insight. But Daniel proposes that it may have been more than just the bullying Isaac received at school that led to his suicide. Perhaps, he suggests, societal treatment of gay kids overall was a contributing factor. As an example, Daniel says that it is likely that Linda put assumptions on Isaac, assumptions most parents make about their children. For example, asking if his close female friend was his “girlfriend,” but not asking if his close male friend was his “boyfriend” (“after all the terrible things I do” 32–33).

In part, this is a play about the assumptions people tend to make about others based simply on surface categorizations such as race or sexual preference. Linda assumes that the bullied character in Daniel’s novel represents the author because she admires him – he seems
intelligent and sensitive. Daniel assumes Linda was a good mother to her son and did all she could to protect him because she seems so concerned about his experiences now. Both of these assumptions turn out to be quite erroneous.

Pamatmat explores other types of assumptions as well, including the presumption some straight women tend to make that a gay male being open about his sexuality is an invitation to infantilize him with endearments like “honey,” “sweetie,” and “darling.” Daniel rejects Linda’s use of these endearments for him, pointing out that she does not use such terms with the other male employees. “I’m not that kind of gay,” he tells her. But even his gentle rebuff hints at a darker aspect of Daniel’s viewpoint on masculinity (“after all the terrible things I do” 35).

Linda reads the chapters of Daniel’s novel as he completes them. Descriptions of how Craig was tormented by Jason spark conversation between the two as they stock the shelves of the bookstore. A passage tells how Craig had once tried to compile a list of all the names that had decorated his locker at one time or another. The passage stirs up a painful memory for Linda of hearing about all the words that had been put on Isaac’s locker, until one day, “the door of the locker was ripped right off,” Linda recalls, “and everything inside was covered in... they had urinated or poured urine on ...” (“after all the terrible things I do” 47).

In the days that follow, Daniel makes two revelations of his own. After weeks of Linda continually offering him sympathy for having been bullied, Daniel reveals that he is the Jason character in the novel, not the Craig character; that he was the one in the relationship that had tormented the other in their youth. Daniel also reveals to Linda that he not only knew her son, Isaac, but that he had been one of the bullies; he had physically attacked Isaac when they were
in school together (“after all the terrible things I do” 56,63). In response, Linda throws him out of the shop.

But in the climatic final scene, which takes place several days later, Daniel returns to pick up his paycheck and Linda takes this opportunity to exorcise her final demons. Linda reveals that she did more than just place assumptions on her son. When Isaac began to get verbally and physically picked on at school, he would ask his mother what the words meant that the boys were calling him, and she responded that the words were bad and something to be ashamed of. But later, when he discovers the true meaning of the words, he tells his mother that they do indeed apply to him, that he does “want to kiss boys.” Linda tells Daniel that after hearing this she smacked Isaac so hard she couldn’t send him to school the next day. She then took him to church weekly and told him to beg God for forgiveness. Linda recalls:

Isaac grew. He would tell me someone at school ruined his things or hurt him, and instead of telling him everything was all right, I told him he should stop wearing that shirt or walking like that or talking so much and so fast and so gay. And I would make him speak to me with his hands at his sides, so he wouldn’t wave them around. And I would make him deepen his voice. And I would tell him to stop being friends with those girls and not to be seen with that boy. But it didn’t stop. And after every horrible incident all I ever said was, “What did you do? Who were you with? What did you say?” And then he took his own life.

(“after all the terrible things I do” 73–74)

She tells Daniel about the moment when she found out her son was dead. “And do you know what the first emotion I felt was? ... Relief,” Linda confesses, “It wasn’t all I felt or even most of it. But it was the first thing. I wouldn’t have to raise a gay son. We would never fight about what
I wanted for him. He would never leave his family for a man” (“after all the terrible things I do” 74).

In *Backwards and Forwards*, David Ball cautions that, “Theme is not what a play means, nor is expression of theme the purpose of a play...Theme is a result. Look for it last” [Emphasis in the original] (Ball 77). Viewing theme as a result, rather than a continuously represented element in the play, alters our perspective on what is truly affecting about the work. On the surface, *after all the terrible things I do* seems to be a play about guilt and assumptions. Structurally, the play is crafted as a dual exorcism in which the play’s two characters use each other as sounding boards in the hope of attaining some sort of catharsis. But the lasting effect of the play, the result, is centered around homophobia. Guilt is merely a consequence of taking an erroneous action for which one is culpable. Both Linda and Jason are experiencing guilt because they acted on their homophobia. Like *fml: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life, Choir Boy, and Teddy Ferrara*, the core issue for these writers – consciously or not – is the fear a significant percentage of people feel when gender norms are not adhered to. The masculine girl or the feminine male become targets in these plays not for who they are sleeping with, but because they exhibit gender characteristics that defy cultural expectations. Cultural traditions around the world so deeply imbed expectations of gender behavior that we conflate that behavior with sex in a manner that it is seemingly immutable. These expectations are programmed into children through gender role socializations at a very early stage, along with the impulse to lash out when variations are observed (Caudwell 111; Sánchez et al.).

It is tempting to focus solely on Linda’s Catholicism or her Filipino heritage as a reason for the abhorrence she has for her son’s effeminate behavior and the dread she carried that he
might be gay. But human development of gender expectations is not so simplistic, and
Pamatmat seems aware of this. Linda tells Daniel that when Isaac was young, she asked her
priest what she should do if her son turned out to be gay. The priest responded, “Love him.
He’s your son.” But Linda could not change her convictions about how a boy is “supposed” to
behave or halt her incessant harassment of him. “I taught Isaac how little he was worth,” She
admits to Daniel, “All he did was act on what I taught him, taking that first betrayal to its
inevitable conclusion. I killed him”(“after all the terrible things I do” 74).

Daniel is no less guilty of possessing his own gender expectations. The idea of a
homophobic homosexual is not a paradox, but simply an expression of the same societal norms
regarding gender that are inflicted on heterosexuals. For males, adherence to traditional
masculine ideals is strongly connected to psychological well-being. When these ideals are
threatened, feelings of insecurity, inadequacy, and inferiority arise. A 2009 study led by
Francisco J. Sánchez of the Center for Gender-Based Biology at the University of California, Los
Angeles, on the effects of masculine ideals on gay men found that, as children, gay males
typically exhibited more gender atypical behaviors as compared to heterosexual peers, yet
over time many gay males succumb to cultural ideals of masculinity:

Like their heterosexual counterparts, gay men have been socialized in a culture
that pressures boys—and subsequently men—to adhere to rigid masculine
ideals. Sometimes this socialization process consists of extensive shaming and
bullying of individuals who violate society’s unwritten gender rules.
Consequently, traditional masculine ideals become central to boys’ developing
identity, and these ideals affect how they view others. During this socialization
process, many gay men may have been particularly targeted. (Sánchez et al. 9)
Like several of the characters labeled bullies in the previous works we have analyzed, Daniel makes the same association of femininity to weakness and inferiority that the heterosexual characters do. The fact that he is attracted to effeminate males doesn’t alter his perceptions any more than the straight character’s attraction to effeminate females alters theirs.

**From White Plains: About the Playwright**

Michael Perlman is a New York based playwright and director who earned his MFA from Brown University/Trinity Rep, where he was taught by Paula Vogel. He speaks of her classes fondly: “She would give us ‘ingredients’ and tell us to write a play in twenty-four hours with no censorship and no fear. That ethos and that bravery is something I really took from her” (Perlman, Personal interview). In addition to his training at Brown, he has attended workshops with Young Playwrights, Inc., and The Playwrights’ Center in Minneapolis. *Flying on the Wing*, Michael’s one-person show, was the winner of Outstanding Solo Show when it was presented at the New York Fringe Festival in 2006. Perlman is a Drama League Directing Fellow and an Artistic Associate with Fault Line Theatre, which first produced *From White Plains*. The play was the recipient of a 2013 GLAAD Media Award, and was also nominated for Outstanding Premiere Production and Outstanding Full-Length Script by the New York Innovative Theater Awards (Perlman, “Michael Perlman - Bio”).

**From White Plains: Production History**

The story of how *From White Plains* came to be written is a bit unusual. After having been brought in to direct at Fault Line, Perlman learned that the rights for the scheduled production were pulled by the publisher. When the rights were not available for their second
selection, Perlman suggested that he write a new play himself, but allow the work to be open to contributions from the cast as they rehearsed. Fault line had been established by his fellow Trinity Rep alumni, several of whom were scheduled to act in the production. Trinity Rep had instilled in the group an awareness that long-standing collaboration can lead to the best work. *From White Plains* was written by Perlman with contributions by Craig Wesley Divino, who played John, Karl Gregory, who played Dennis, Jimmy King, who performed the role of Gregory, and Aaron Rossini, who played Ethan. A workshop production was staged at Teatro LATEA in June 2012 before the full mounting at Pershing Square Signature Center in January 2013 (Perlman, Personal interview; Perlman et al. 3).

*From White Plains: Analysis*

The quandary in *From White Plains* revolves around screenwriter Dennis Sullivan’s journey toward forgiveness and his former classmate Ethan Rice’s journey toward self-realization. The play opens directly after Dennis has received an Academy Award for his screenplay for an independent film entitled *White Plains*, named after the suburban New York town in which he grew up and attended high school. During his acceptance speech, Dennis dedicates his award to his friend Mitchell, around whose suicide the film’s story revolves. He also declares to the international television audience that Mitchell’s death was the result of the anti-gay verbal and physical torments he received at the hands of their fellow high school classmate, Ethan Rice.

*From White Plains* opens with Ethan and his best friend, John, sitting on the couch of Ethan’s New York apartment, in shock after hearing Dennis’ speech on television. The speech sparks both an internal struggle for Ethan, who begins a critical examination of his younger self,
and brings to the surface heretofore hidden tensions between the two close friends, the crux of which concerns John’s openly gay brother and his own encounters with a high school bully. Dennis’ speech is, of course, the intrusion that shatters the stasis and ignites the action of the play. But unlike the other works that have been analyzed, a duality is presented at the start of the play. In reflecting on the world in stasis that is made evident in *From White Plains*, we can conclude that Ethan has lived in blissful ignorance of the effect his words and actions have had on his high school classmates, while Dennis has been unable to escape the psychological anguish Ethan has caused. The televised comments mark the beginning of Dennis’ journey to rid himself of this anguish, while dispelling Ethan’s obliviousness.

On the other side of Manhattan, tension is also running high in Dennis’ relationship with his boyfriend, Gregory, who urges Dennis to let go of his obsession with Ethan. Dennis’ growing bitterness at the death of his high school chum, combined with a renewed conviction sparked by his recent accolades as a screenwriter, lead him to post a series of online videos publicly disparaging Ethan’s character even further, despite Ethan’s own equally public acquiescence and apology.

The social reaction to Dennis’ speech begins to tear Ethan’s world apart as one by one he loses his girlfriend, his job, and his best friend’s trust. He is forced to close his Facebook account due to the incessant posts disparaging him, some of which refer to him as a murderer. Ethan continues to post public videos in which he apologizes and attempts to explain that he had no idea the effect his behavior was having on Mitchell during his high school years. When these efforts fail, he begins to turn inward and question not only who he was, but the kind of person he is now.
Perlman wisely avoids cliché by reversing audience sympathy at points and allowing the audience to gain insight into Ethan’s own perspective on the actions of his insecure younger self. “I mean. It was high school. I was an asshole in high school... To everyone,” Ethan tries to explain to John, “I was an asshole to everyone. I just, you know, tried to be funny” (10–11).

However, Dennis’ relentless persecution of Ethan creates a dynamic in which the bully becomes the bullied, and Dennis’ partner, Gregory, questions his true motives. Gregory suggests that perhaps Dennis’ vendetta is not simply about Mitchell’s suicide, but his own experience of being victimized by Ethan during high school. The abruptness with which events turn against Ethan, including the loss of his job and the abandonment of his friends, forces us to question the extent to which Dennis’ own belligerence prevents any chance of redemption for Ethan, or at least some kind of understanding. Perlman underscores the fact that understanding is needed to bridge the divide and, difficult as it may be, this understanding must come from both sides. In the penultimate scene, Dennis is given the opportunity to unleash the angst that has built up inside him over the years and he finally forgives Ethan face to face. During the ordeal, Ethan seems to have made some connections which have led to his personal growth, and he ultimately realizes that what Dennis really needs is simply to be heard.

David Ball writes that, “*What* a character does is half the revelation. *Why* the character does it is the other half” [Emphasis in the original] (Ball 63). The *whats* and the *whys* of the four characters in *From White Plains* create a paradigm of identities and motivations that continually pull and push against each other. While Ethan wrestles with the pain he has caused in the past and the effect it is having in the present, his friend John begins to drift away from him, leaving him isolated. While Dennis’s focus on Ethan begins to turn into a dangerous obsession, Gregory
tries to reassure Dennis that he is there for him. Each of the characters in *From White Plains* has a unique perspective that is tied together at the center of the play. “The play does feel Kaleidoscopic to me,” Perlman said, “in that all four men make up one three-dimensional point of view” (Perlman, Personal interview).

For Dennis, that point of view becomes narrowly focused and shuttered. He is irrationally obsessed with destroying Ethan’s reputation, and his position as both newly acclaimed screenwriter and victim aligns national sentiment behind him. He uses his power to righteously lash out at Ethan, motivated by the torment he and Mitchell experienced. But that same distress has begun to interfere in his own personal relationships, particularly with Gregory, who he begins to ignore as he becomes obsessed with revenge. While Dennis’ feelings about Mitchell’s suicide are sincere, in his lengthy monologue at the end of the play, when he finally has the opportunity to address Ethan one-on-one, he talks about the anguish that he still carries with him. The anguish stems not from Mitchell’s death, but from his own experience of being bullied by Ethan and how that continues to affect him:

> And I remember everything that happened. Everything. And it’s not because I’m holding on to it. It’s because it is holding onto me. And it’s not holding onto you. And that’s not fair. It’s not fair. (53)

Dennis concludes his speech by saying that he will publicly forgive Ethan and that they will move on. Although we do not hear from Dennis again, there is a sense that he has experienced a liberation in being able to finally address the subject of his pain.

The effects of childhood peer-victimization can be severe and include increased emotional disorders and suicidality well into adulthood (Copeland, Wolke, Angold, et al. 423–
Dennis seems to be suffering from what practicing therapist and professor of social work, Ellen Walser deLara terms Adult Post-Bullying Syndrome (APBS), a complex set of symptoms that stem from the trauma of bullying episodes. While some people recover from the effects of childhood bullying relatively quickly, symptoms last well into adulthood for others. These symptoms include low self-esteem, feelings of anger, rage or revenge, and difficulty maintaining relationships. This counters the misperception that children are usually resilient in the face of traumatic experiences (deLara 16–17). The character of Dennis, as created by Michael Perlman, seems to be a textbook example of someone who suffers from APBS, as he exhibits most of the symptoms during the course of From White Plains.

In *after all the terrible things I do*, Daniel is plagued with guilt for the bullying acts he committed as a child, but Perlman presents us with the more common scenario – an adult who has little or no idea how his actions have affected other people and is completely surprised to find that his words have power. When we are introduced to Ethan at the start of the play, he seems likeable enough and is understandable shaken by what he has witnessed on his television. “I am not a bully,” he tells John, “I don’t want to hurt people. Anyone. I never have” (8–9). And while this seems earnest, during further interaction with John, Ethan tells jokes that are likely offensive to LGBTQ people and women. He uses the word “gay” as a disparaging adjective and the word “pussy” as a derogatory noun. “Quit acting like such a fag,” he tells John when his friend shows a hint of emotion (25–26). Through this seeming contradiction, Perlman is demonstrating Ethan’s ignorance at the power of his own words, and we begin to get glimpses of the teenage Ethan that walked the halls of White Plains High School seeking targets to abuse in the hopes of finding momentary entertainment for himself and others. But the
character is complex: he is intelligent, contemplative, and sensitive. In his climatic monologue, Dennis tells Ethan:

   And I looked in your eyes, and I didn’t see a crazy. Or see someone struggling with his own sexuality. Or someone angry at the world for what he was going through. I just saw a, a, a, you know, nice, normal person who saw me, and saw Mitchell, and decided we were weaker and inferior. (52–53)

The fact that Ethan seemed to be quite normal triggered a prolonged fear for both Dennis and Mitchell. Ethan didn’t fit the comic strip stereotype of the bully, and yet he repeatedly attacked them. Not being able to identify those who might persecute or torment them – the idea that it could be anyone – produced further trauma that has led to lasting anguish.

   At first, Ethan doesn’t understand how his words and actions affect other people. When initially accused, he is combative and quick to argue. He swiftly deflects every reasonable point made by John about the issue with his own defensive justification. But as he becomes increasingly isolated, Ethan begins a process of self-evaluation and starts to understand the dynamics of human interaction and somehow, during this process, he expands his sense of compassion until finally, during Dennis’ cathartic concluding speech, Ethan learns to remain silent. He does not speak again in the play. But it is in his silence, in letting Dennis pour out his anguish without interruption, that Ethan demonstrates this new-found sense of empathy and understanding. Perlman has said that, “Ethan’s redemption is actually in leaving room for someone else. He discovers that his words have power. For him it’s about learning to shut up; it’s about understanding that what Dennis needs is to be heard” (Perlman, Personal interview).

   While Dennis’ boyfriend, Gregory, attempts to remain supportive of Dennis, he feels strongly that Dennis’ tactics will not yield positive results for either him or Ethan. In attempting
to get Dennis to take a more reasonable approach, he alludes to both his own high school experience and Dan Savage’s current national campaign:

Things are better now. They are. This isn’t high school. We’re not being picked on at the playground anymore. We’re not being shoved into lockers or – or whatever happened to us in high school. We’re not. Things are better now. Not everything has to be a fight. Why is everything a fight? (19)

It is clear Gregory wishes to avoid conflict, not only in Dennis’ current situation but in other areas of his life as well. Gregory has not yet come out to his parents. This is a point of contention in his relationship with Dennis, who compares his fearlessness in bringing down Ethan with Gregory’s cowardice in remaining closeted. But being witness to what his partner is going through affects Gregory. In a highly coincidental moment, Gregory runs into Ethan’s friend, John, on the subway. Neither of them is aware of who the other is, but the newspaper article John is reading sparks a conversation between them about the incident. In the scene, each defends the actions of the other’s partner: Gregory feels Dennis should let go of the past, but John, who reveals he was severely bullied in high school as well, points out that this may not be emotionally possible. John tells Gregory that, “The feeling of ...of being the kind of person that could be hated. That deserves to be hated. It doesn’t go away ... you have to do what you can to make it go away” (38). When Gregory asks what he did, John replies that he surrounded himself with people that make him feel like the kind of person who could be loved. John tells Gregory of his own recent engagement to a girl named Emily, which prompts Gregory to propose to Dennis. The final scene shows Gregory speaking with his father on the phone. They discuss plans to meet – a hint that Gregory may finally come out to his family.
Stasis is reestablished and the play’s primary themes of forgiveness and redemption have been made evident by the series of heaps and triggers Perlman has carefully arranged. As with *all the terrible things I do*, the structure is complex. Both works have moments where our sympathies turn in favor of those we know to have contributed, at least to some extent, to the suicide of a young man, and this may challenge our assumptions about bullies. That challenge is exactly what Perlman was looking to create through the play’s complications and nuances:

I was under no assumption that if we were doing this play in New York that anyone would be coming to the theatre believing that gay bullying is a good thing, or even that gay people are bad. How do you complicate it? How do you address a group of people who think they know their opinion one hundred percent when they come in, and get them to question the foundation of what they believe. (Perlman, Personal interview)

Both Perlman and Pamatmat have no desire to supply easy answers. Forgiveness can be excruciatingly difficult and complex. It is the opposite of revenge. But despite the pleadings of Hamlet’s father’s ghost, forgiveness is the only path to healing and peace of mind.

*after all the terrible things I do* and *From White Plains*: Comparison with Federal Initiatives on Bullying

The first existential philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, once said, “Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards” (qtd. in Collins 37). In A. Rey Pamatmat’s *after all the terrible things I do* and Michael Perlman’s *From White Plains*, we are introduced to characters who look back on their high school experiences, either because they are haunted by them or because they are suddenly forced to grapple with their own past actions. Unlike the works previously examined in this survey, neither of these plays makes any mention of
intervention by persons in authority—principals or teachers—at the schools in which the peer-victimization was said to have taken place. Given the timeline established in both plays, it is likely that the bullying incidents would have taken place before the massacre at Columbine (1999), after which overwhelming national attention was given to the social climate at schools and anti-violence initiatives were enacted.

Under the Climate and Prevention section of The Department of Education’s Guiding Principles, schools are advised to prioritize the use of evidence-based prevention strategies that identify at-risk students, and match tiered supports and interventions—universal, targeted, and intensive—to meet their varied behavioral and developmental needs. In circumstances such as those presented in after all the terrible things I do and From White Plains, targeted supports would have been most appropriate for Daniel, while Ethan’s behavior justifies more intensive intervention. Targeted supports include “group interventions, mentoring, peer mentoring, and team building, [which] are provided to students displaying occasional signs of mild to moderate misbehavior” (U.S. Department of Education 6). In after all the terrible things I do, Daniel physically assaults Isaac after dragging him under the coverings of a pine tree. There is no mention of any supervision during the incident or any admonishment of Daniel by school authorities afterwards. Interventions, such as school counseling or LGBTQ peer support groups, might have helped reverse the symptoms of internalized homophobia he is exhibiting, which Meyer and Dean define as “the gay person’s direction of negative social attitudes toward the self” (qtd. in Frost and Meyer 97), that in turn may have prevented his acting out. In after all the terrible things I do, Daniel speaks of only one specific instance of peer-victimization, but in From White Plains we hear that Ethan habitually tormented at least two of his peers over the course
of several years, which indicates the need for intensive interventions. Intensive interventions are “individual interventions the school, local agencies, or other stakeholders provide to students who display frequent, moderate or severe forms of misbehavior, or to students who have experienced trauma or who display other risk factors” (U.S. Department of Education 6). Even under the intensive support approach, the goal is to reduce the need for disciplinary action and promote positive social, emotional, and academic outcomes for the student.

It seems clear that the schools represented in both of these plays have not established high and positive expectations for student behavior as recommended by the second principle in the guidelines. Respect for others in the school community has not been promoted, and clear consequences for engaging in violence and bullying have not been established (U.S. Department of Education 12). According to Stopbullying.org, the web-based repository that coordinates closely with the Federal Partners in Bullying Prevention Steering Committee, adults must determine if the situation qualifies as bullying, and if so, discover the nature of the peer-victimization by asking questions about the history between the children involved and if there have been past conflicts. Adults must determine if there is a power imbalance, keeping in mind that such an imbalance is not limited to physical strength. If the targeted child feels like there is a power imbalance, there probably is. And finally, adults should inquire if the targeted youth is worried that such an incident will occur again (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, “StopBullying.gov”). In the climatic speech in From White Plains, Dennis suggests that the paranoia Mitchell experienced before his suicide was the most debilitating effect of Ethan’s bullying. “Mitchell couldn’t drown your voice out,” Dennis tells Ethan, “He went off to college
and saw every nice, normal pair of eyes as a potential threat, and every person laughing as someone laughing at him” (Perlman et al. 53).

After analyzing the U.S. Department of Education’s Guiding Principles by using the fictitious scenarios created by these playwrights, we can extrapolate that in each instance there would have been significantly more impediments to the specific peer-victimization incidents – name-calling, graffiti, harassment, physical attacks – had the recommended measures been put in place in each of these schools. Through the implementation of supervision, clear expectations of behavior, and the addition of universal and targeted supports for faculty and students, it is likely that many of the types of events described in these plays would not have taken place.

**Tackling the Relevant Issues In-depth: Cyberbullying and Technology on Stage in *fml: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life*, *Teddy Ferrara*, and *From White Plains***

In three of the plays we have explored, there is a prevalent secondary theme concerning the domination of technology over personal relationships. In *Teddy Ferrara*, Shinn looks at the way modern technology, which was so intertwined in the events surrounding Tyler Clementi’s death, gives us a false sense of connection and ultimately has an isolating effect in which real human interaction is replaced with texts, posts, tweets, webcams, and blog entries. We see this almost at the onset, and technology’s presence in the story is unrelenting and ultimately plays a chilling and vital part in creating Teddy’s unstable emotional state. One of the very first things a well-meaning Gabe says to the nervous Teddy is “I’ll add you on Facebook” (Shinn, *Teddy Ferrara* 10). It’s not Shakespeare, but it is illustrative of how current youth culture tends toward the collective rather than the personal. The impulse is to “add” friends, not form friendships.
Later, in a rather sad moment, we find Teddy in his dorm room speaking via webcam to a bunch of strangers, likely a group of older gay men, who have come to watch him perform various sexual activities. He addresses them as if they are his close friends who dependably show up whenever he turns on his computer. We never see Teddy with any non-web-based companions. Shinn paints a picture of a young man so desperate for company that he is willing to degrade himself for the brief attention.

In *fml: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life*, much of the plot unfolds via text messages projected on the scenery that are sent or received from characters who are onstage. This allows Gubbins to juxtapose the sincere with the feigned, as we often see characters, particularly Emma, respond verbally to another character onstage while texting contrasting opinions to someone currently offstage or unseen. Gubbins seems to be saying that technology allows us to disguise our true selves, and the image we present in the digital social sphere is merely an illusion, a false identity. Often the descriptions of the media related aspects of *fml: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life* give the script the feeling of a screenplay and lessen the enjoyment of reading the work, but this might be irrelevant in a piece that is meant to be seen in performance.

Practically every scene in *From White Plains* prominently features some sort of communication technology, and several scenes are comprised entirely of characters making webcam videos or texting. Unlike *fml: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life*, Perlman’s characters “text-talk” by reading their texts or emails out loud as they type or as they are received on their cell phones. Yet, in a stroke of wisdom, the most profound interaction seen in the play comes when Dennis confronts Ethan in person, sans technology. The scene plays like a
breath of fresh air and beautifully illustrates the dilemmas faced when conducting any emotional discourse through technological means.

In *Teddy Ferrara*, Shinn never reveals Teddy’s roommate to us, a person of vital importance in the real-life Tyler Clementi story. When word of Tyler’s suicide hit the national media, Dharun Ravi, Tyler’s roommate, who secretly recorded his romantic encounters, became the focus of the country’s outrage. In Ian Parker’s detailed exposé published in the *New Yorker*, Parker was able to uncover a trail of technological breadcrumbs that revealed intimate details of the story that stretched from the months before Tyler met his future roommate, through to Ravi’s court hearing on charges of invasion of privacy (Parker). We see how technology has not only played a part in the story but has allowed us to piece together the very thoughts of those individuals involved through their posts, tweets, text messages and other forms of data that remain forever in the technological continuum.

One can’t help questioning why the renewed focus on bullying, that initially stemmed from the national attention given to a string of peer-victimization related suicides by gay youth in 2010, seems so intertwined with technology in these dramatic works. It is possible that technologically based socialization has a more pervasive daily presence in the lives of children and teenagers today and therefore allows verbal and text-based intimidation to occur on an almost round-the-clock basis rather than during the defined hours when mandatory appearances at the bus stop, school hallways, or cafeteria were the norm. The phenomenon known as cyberbullying has become a major concern for governmental agencies and independent organizations that focus on peer-victimization. As discussed earlier, the Centers for Disease Control’s categorization of the direct and indirect modes of bullying is the result of
the growing trend of cyberbullying. Indirect bullying is defined as aggressive behaviors that are targeted outside of the direct presence of the victim and include spreading false and/or harmful rumors or communicating harmful rumors electronically (Gladden et al. 7–8). Studies have shown that children often feel a deeper sense of depression and anxiety from cyberbullying than from traditional bullying. Youth may engage in online activities in an attempt to be included and not isolated, consequently becoming a target of aggressive behavior or the victim of rumor or public embarrassment in these mediums can lead to a feeling of defeat and despair (deLara 105). Technology empowers those who seek to victimize. The web creates a shield, through anonymity and/or distance, that can be used to generate aggression and hate. A single individual sitting at home can impact an entire school culture, attacking multiple peers through the internet. Likewise, a group of students can also generate feelings of shame and humiliation for a single student through social media (Twemlow and Sacco 265).

It is also possible that as bullying has moved from the playground to the web, the catharsis offered by the physical altercations of the past, which sometimes helped to temporarily deflate the tension created by an antagonistic relationship, have been replaced by technologically-transmitted psychological provocations which are more unyielding and offer fewer possibilities for resolution. Suicidal thinking is often the result of the perception that there will be no change in the current state of things, which is the logic behind Savage’s “It Gets Better” campaign. Shinn, Gubbins, and Perlman are right to shine a spotlight on the desire of LGBTQ youth for community, and the isolating effects of technology that impede that development. These are elements that are entrenched in both the cause and effect of this suicide and bullying phenomenon. Perlman has said that, “Now more than ever, every human
to human interaction makes the world better. I’m interested in empathy and human connection and technology is a major obstacle to that” [Admittedly, Perlman said this to me over Skype, but I believe there is truth in the sentiment.] (Perlman, Personal interview).
In this research, I am seeking to build on the work of theatre historians and scholars such as John Clum, Alan Sinfield, and Don Shewey, by exploring how a new generation of American lesbian and gay playwrights is reacting to the epidemic of bullying and teen suicide, particularly after the events of September 2010. I am asking the question: is bullying becoming a common theme in the post-AIDS era of gay and lesbian theatre-making and if so, what approaches and techniques are being used by these playwrights in their attempt to effect change? As a supplement to these questions, I am also looking at whether these approaches reflect knowledge gained from the work of previous gay and lesbian playwrights in the “Identity plays” and the “AIDS plays.”

In many ways, this exploration seeks to continue documenting the history of a specific, yet eclectic and ever-changing, group of people through their representation and contribution to the theatre. You might ask what need exists to connect this body of work to a larger historical narrative and attempt to establish a thematic trend? Why not just look at recent plays that deal with bullying and teen suicide by gay and lesbian authors as a fundamentally detached phenomenon worthy of study for its own sake? The answer might seem contentious because this is not the case with other demographics or communities but the bulk of American gay and lesbian history has been represented more truthfully and more directly through its contribution to the theatre than through other mediums. If theatrical contribution seems at first an odd entryway into history, keep in mind that for centuries historians, anthropologists, and sociologists have represented gay culture as merely a footnote in history, not worthy of serious
study ... or worse, have purposely erased the homosexual aspects of historical figures and events in the name of religious sanctity. Playwright Harvey Fierstein exclaims that vast records of LGBTQ contribution have been expunged from the annals of history. “Our lives seem to be evidenced only in the fecal materials of lawsuits, police files, and pornography,” Fierstein wrote, “For most of our history, our everyday lives were cloaked in shame and secrecy. Our heritage, our culture, our possessions have been usurped by the greater heterosexual populace” (Fierstein x). He credits the theatre as being the only vehicle through which the truths of our existence and our stories have been told. “Why theatre? Because it is the ultimate in artifice, it therefore demands the most stringent adherence to truth,” Fierstein explains, “The fact is, we do have honest gay and lesbian history in theatrical form, and it leaves a worthy record of our experience” (Fierstein xi–xii). In introducing a collection of celebrated plays in the gay and lesbian canon, Ben Hodges echoes Fierstein’s idea of theatre’s importance as a preserver of LGBTQ history: “[These plays] remain vibrant and relevant not only as studies of gay and lesbian history, but also as testaments to art’s irrepressible ability to preserve in the face of oppression, to collect and make audible the voices of unheard communities, and to deepen their understanding of them once they have developed a presence” (Hodges xv–xvi).

James Fisher writes that one objective of gay theatre is to provide perspectives on the historical progress of gays and lesbians. Fisher believes that gay playwrights, “Illuminate the experience of gays and lesbians as societies continue to reckon with the changes that have occurred since the 1960s and the continuing debate of the social, religious, and political issues of homosexual life in the United States in the twenty-first century” (Fisher, “Introduction” 4–5).
Tony Kushner has said that, “gay theatre artists ... are collectively shaping the next chapter in the history of American gay theatre, which has at times been inseparable from the history of American theatre in its entirety” (Kushner, “Foreword: Notes Toward a Theater of the Fabulous” vii). American theatrical history and American LGBTQ history are intertwined. An exploration of what lesbian and gay playwrights were writing about in the past exposes the various climates of oppression that have sparked the historical struggles for the larger gay community, while presenting the personal experiences of those who lived through those struggles. The canon of American gay dramatic writing becomes an archive of American LGBTQ history. This relationship developed through necessity for the burgeoning American gay and lesbian community but has equally benefited the American theatrical tradition.

In his 1992 landmark book, Acting Gay, John Clum sought to interpret the central works of gay male drama written by English and American playwrights. He wrote that for much of the twentieth century, theatre was one of the only public forums a gay writer had. Therefore, theatre was a primary voice for gay culture and, as Clum points out, “often acted as its mirror” (Clum, Acting Gay xi). Through the work of gay playwrights, Clum sought to explore the transformations in the role gay men have played in society overall. Within these pages, I have sought to continue that exploration and build on its findings by looking at what influential lesbian and gay playwrights have been focused on since 2010 and how this current focus interacts with previous thematic trends in gay and lesbian drama.

One particular discovery has emerged through this exploration. Clum uses the term “Post-Stonewall” to describe one of two types of plays that he categorizes as gay drama. He refers to the Post-Stonewall plays as those that are written primarily for gay audiences, such as
the works of Robert Patrick or Doric Wilson, which are purposely coterie and not intended for heterosexual viewing. Likewise, Clum uses the term “Pre-Stonewall” or “closet dramas” to refer to plays written by gay playwrights that cater to the mores and prejudices of mainstream audiences. Clum identifies the inherent internalized homophobia of playwrights of the past, like Williams and Inge, who “exploit taboos about homosexuality while presenting homosexual stereotypes” (Clum, *Acting Gay* xiii). Although it may seem contrary, Post-Stonewall plays, written by playwrights exclusively for other LGBTQ persons, are now rare. Like their heterosexual counterparts, gay and lesbian playwrights most often desire that their plays reach the largest possible audience, particularly if their livelihood is dependent on the financial gains made from their work. Clum recognizes the fusing of the Post-Stonewall type of gay drama with mainstream drama that occurred throughout the 1980s.

In the history presented in Chapter One, I discussed the repeated scenario in American drama of the 1930s – 1960s, where homosexuality was presented as the “problem” that must somehow be resolved or expunged by the final curtain, with the resolution most often leading to the suicide of the character (who may never even appear onstage) accused of this perversion. This research has identified that these bully plays have now entirely reversed the scenario common in the Pre-Stonewall type of gay drama, and presented stories wherein the “problem” is the threat to the homosexual (or bisexual, transgendered, gender fluid, or gay-perceived) character. The bulling behavior - which stems from a variety of learned psycho-social traits and is manifested though a diverse set of characters in a variety of situations – has now become the “problem” that must be expunged.
The Playwrights Respond: LGBTQ Identity and Playwriting

This study specifically selected dramatic works written by LGBTQ playwrights that focused on bullying or teen suicide caused by bullying. The purpose for this specification in sexual identification lies in the attempt to connect the plays written by these artists with the works of previous gay and lesbian dramatists, since that historical perspective would allow us to view current thematic trends through the lens of the larger scope of gay drama. The works analyzed in these pages were written by one self-identified lesbian and five self-identified gay men. This specification for inclusion in the study infers a commonality that exists among these playwrights that does not occur in cisgender heterosexual playwrights. Looking at the connections these playwrights have to the theatre and their motivations for writing for the stage, as well as their experiences as lesbian and gay artists, could help shed some light on what this commonality might possibly be.

For Brian Guehring, the theatre was a place where he knew that he would feel safe and welcomed. Guehring had worked for five years as an instructor at a sports camp for kids and decided, after attaining his undergraduate degree, that he wanted to go into sports management. For a while he worked for a professional hockey team. “At the same time, I was coming to grips with my sexuality and how important that was to me,” he recalls, “But then I realized that I didn’t know in this field if I would ever … In sports management, as the gay man, I would be the outsider, I would be the one that was different than everyone else” (Guehring, Personal interview). He had participated in theatre for the first time during his undergraduate years and remembered how welcoming of individual expression the university theatre department was. “The theatre is a very safe space, and that is why we (gay people) are
attracted to it.” But Guehring wanted to continue working with children while also connecting to the gay and lesbian community; a community that he had ignored all of his life. His work in bringing theatre-based activities to OutYouth in Austin, and his current position with Pride Players based out of the Omaha Theatre for Young People, has allowed him to remain engaged with these passionate areas of his life. “I am very fortunate to have a career in a field that embraces all of who I am,” Guehring told me, “Working with youth, working with queer youth, and still writing for the stage…. Not everyone gets to do something that combines so many aspects of themselves.” He states that he is first and foremost a “queer artist, and I bring that aesthetic to everything I do” (Guehring, Personal interview). He believes it is important that LGBTQ voices be heard, and when writing for youth theatre, whether it’s a stage-adaptation of someone else’s novel or an original piece, he feels a responsibility to present positive representations of LGBTQ characters and show inclusivity on the stage.

This is not necessarily the case for A. Rey Pamatmat. When asked if feels any sense of responsibility as a gay playwright to address issues and stories relevant to the LGBTQ experience, he responded, “I do not feel responsible to tell these stories. I don’t feel a particular responsibility to deal with race, gender, etc. I write from my point of view and hope that others will slip into my perspective” (Pamatmat, Personal interview). Which may, of course, mark the difference between a children’s theatre playwright and one who writes for adults without concern for molding young minds. However, Pamatmat does allude to a queer aesthetic: “People should write whatever they want to write. Most of the things I write are intuitive, meaning that they will be overwhelmingly queer, overwhelmingly me,” he told me. Some LGBTQ artists have made a connection with the American theatre, they’ve made a home.
But this is not yet the case for playwrights, actors, and directors of color. For Pamatmat, who identifies as a gay Asian playwright, the American theatre community is currently wrestling with the big questions of race and representation – how is race portrayed on the American stage and, even more importantly to Pamatmat, by who? For him, this is the big question in terms of his own identity in the American theatre – not his sexuality, but his race. His perspective on the issue was best clarified in a discussion we had on how the American theatre community continues to encounter dilemmas in how it handles casting. Casting became an issue of particular concern to Pamatmat recently when the Curious Theatre Company in Denver attempted to produce his play *Edith Can Shoot Things and Hit Them* with white actors.

Pamatmat recalls, “They called and said they didn’t have any Asian actors audition, but I told them they cannot produce it without an appropriate cast. So they ended up flying in two actors from the original production.” He added, “If they are not going to do it in a way that I love, then I prefer that they not do it” (Pamatmat, Personal interview).

Pamatmat clarified that cross-ethnic casting is not a problem for him. “I have no issue with, say, a Chinese-American playing a Filipino,” he said. But he is adamantly against the idea of “yellow-face,” where a white actor portrays an Asian person. His reasoning is that a white actor would not have the depth of experience and therefore the nuance that a person of color could bring to the roles that he creates. Pamatmat is also concerned with the overall lack of representation of Asian-Americans, including within the gay male community, and feels his plays can be used to counter this lack. “There’s the obstacle when you are a queer person of color and the only representation is white men. It makes you feel like you have to abandon your ethnicity in order to identify with your sexuality,” Pamatmat said, “But we [gay people of color]
often have to reconcile our ethnicity with our faith as well as our sexuality” (Pamatmat, Personal interview). It is therefore important to cast an actor who can both identify and represent the experience of the character.

I inquired how he would feel if a straight actor played Daniel, the young, openly gay man in *after all the terrible things I do*? His response yielded a refreshing consistency of thought. Pamatmat said, again, it would depend on the depth of knowledge of the actor. “For the Chicago production, we had two actors [audition who were] equally strong for the role of Daniel,” he recalled, “But we asked around - just casually in the acting community - about both and found that one was gay. So we hired the gay actor.” This approach makes good sense since, like race, sexuality revolves around the formation of an identity that incorporates personal, cultural, and social perspectives, including those formed through shared oppression. “For [the role of] Daniel, the complexity of the homophobia within the character is difficult for a straight person to understand,” Pamatmat points out. “The complexity can be challenging even for a gay actor, but their experience is a lot closer” (Pamatmat, Personal interview). The American theatrical community remains divided on the issue of casting straight actors in gay roles.

Like Pamatmat, Sarah Gubbins feels her gayness is just one aspect of what she brings to her work as a playwright. While *fml: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life* might not be directly autobiographical, the central character is a young lesbian woman, which is the case for many of the protagonists in Gubbins’ plays. When asked about lesbianism as a reoccurring trend in her work, Gubbins stated that:

I don’t know that I would say lesbianism is *central* to it—and that’s not backing off it at all. I just populate my writing with a gender presence, a queer presence, a class presence in the creation of character. For me, these are ways in which
people experience the world. And so to draw a character is to address their
gender presentation, their gender expression—but I wouldn’t ever say there’s a
hierarchy. I think the great thing about including gender in your storytelling is
that you have an opportunity to try to write various experiences that queer
people have in the world. (qtd. in Royal)

Creating characters that ignite a gendered or queer presence allows Gubbins to engage her
audience with perspectives that are underrepresented but still appealing due to how relatable
the situations are that Gubbins creates for them (an unexpected pregnancy, family members
with handguns, getting bullied, etc.). Like Guehring, it was essential to Gubbins that there be
positive representation for young LGBTQ people that attend her plays. “It was very important
to me that that students who are out and gay have a representation onstage—that they’re seen
as legitimate characters” (qtd. in Morgan). Gubbins didn’t come to terms with her own
homosexuality until well after high school and expresses a bit of remorse about the delay. She
admires today’s youth who seem not only to come out very early, but seem to be almost
fearless about their sexuality, which she finds "astonishingly brave and inspiring" (qtd. in
Isaacs). The times are different, of course, and the freedoms young LGBTQ people experience
today were hard won by the generations before them. And those freedoms are not allotted
equally across the nation to all LGBTQ Youth.

For Tarell Alvin McCraney, being gay is what led him to the theatre. The stage became
an escape from the verbal torment and physical harassment he was experiencing daily while
growing up in Liberty City. When he was eight or nine he started noticing what he calls “artistic
differences” between himself and his peers. He liked ballet and preferred wearing pointe shoes
to "sweatpants and Timberlands," which is what all the other boys in his neighborhood were
wearing (Lamont). A counselor at McCraney’s high school became concerned about the frail, bullied student who didn’t seem to fit in anywhere. The counselor referred him to Teo Castellanos, a renowned director, actor and playwright, who ran a theatre program for marginalized communities in the Miami area. Castellanos took McCraney under his wing and nurtured his talent and love for the theatre (Hannah-jones; Leonin). The theatre became an outlet for all of McCraney’s pent-up feelings about being gay, being bullied, and having a drug-addicted mother who was recently diagnosed with AIDS. “Where do I put all this?” he asked himself, and at fourteen started writing his first play – a monologue about having Kaposi’s Sarcoma, a condition associated with AIDS that causes lesions and blistering of the skin. McCraney says that his mother didn’t actually have Kaposi’s sarcoma. “What I wrote actually came from a growing fear within myself,” McCraney recalls, “There was this huge understanding that if you were gay, and you were black, well, you got AIDS. It was terrifying for me. When I was a kid, people told me I had really nice skin and I thought: this one thing, the one thing people say is good about me, is going to be destroyed” (qtd. in Lamont). His mother died when he was 23. McCraney has maintained his relationship with Castellanos and has recently directed his mentor in a production of *The Brothers Size* and *Third Trinity* (2014), a one-person show Castellanos wrote. Remarkably, they are both recipients of a MacArthur Genius Grant (Leonin).

Christopher Shinn recently had the opportunity to reflect on the time in his life when he realized he was gay. In 2012, Shinn was diagnosed with Ewing Sarcoma, a rare cancer, and his prognosis was grim. The disease had a five-year survival rate of 7%. He decided to start a new play, entitled *An Opening in Time*, which forced him to look deeply at his life, including his
childhood in Wethersfield, Connecticut, where the play takes place. He remembered the feelings of isolation he experienced in the mid-eighties when he knew he was attracted to other boys. “This deep sadness started to emerge,” he recalled, “I had these feelings and thoughts about being gay, yet no one else was gay, no one was out, no one talked about it” (Healy, “For Christopher Shinn, Confronting Death Brings a New Play to Life”). These feelings may explain why so many of the characters in Shinn’s plays are desperate to connect with other people. Personal reflection plays a large role in Shinn’s work and in his life, as evidenced by his enthusiastic commitment to psychotherapy. Shinn is a writer who strives to create the complex and nuanced ways human beings interact and put that on the stage. It is also vital to Shinn that the sexual desires of the characters he creates are a part of everything that motivates them, including those motivations that lead to less than heroic actions. When I asked him about why he felt the need to have each of his gay male characters take a disappointing action at some point in Teddy Ferrara, he responded:

The only thing I was concerned about was representing truthful behavior on the level of sexual desire and its various manifestations, and appeals to being seen as a victim and all that goes along with that. Everyone plays the game of desire to some extent and everyone wants to be seen sympathetically and distorts reality to support that goal... Showing people doing this is interesting, dramatic, and truthful! I find "good/bad" binaries boring and untruthful and avoid them as much as I can. (Shinn, Personal interview)

After nineteen rounds of chemotherapy, Shinn is now N.E.D. (No Evidence of Disease), and continues to both write and re-write. In 2015, he updated Teddy Ferrara to reflect the recent sweeping changes in the socio-political climate (same-sex marriage, etc.). The updated version
opened in London, a city that seems to have embraced his work with far more enthusiasm than New York, which he now calls home (Healy, “For Christopher Shinn, Confronting Death Brings a New Play to Life”).

Like several of the other playwrights in this exploration, Michael Perlman was drawn to the theatre because it was a place where he felt safe as a gay person. “We have found a community that welcomes us,” he told me. As an American Gay Playwright, he considers himself beholden to those who have come before – Williams, Inge, Albee, Wilson, etc. – those playwrights who have helped established the historic relationship the LGBTQ community has with the theatre. Like John Clum, Perlman has observed the unusual connection gay men in particular have with the American theatre, and how their history has been played out within a large catalog of works written for the stage. Perlman believes the reason for this connection resides in the desire to be heard:

To me it’s all connected to the same thing, and I include the Identity plays and AIDS plays: we want to be seen and we want to be heard. The major events of our time are going to shape the stories we want to tell. The stories from ourselves that we want other people to see and hear. As our role in society has shifted, the stories we feel need to be told are shifting, and what we want people to care about in terms of our identity is shifting. I think when people were writing about AIDS, it wasn't just that we were dying, it’s that nobody seemed to care. How do we make people care? The way you make people care is that you create characters that people empathize with – and that they see themselves in – who are passionate and eloquent and flawed. (Perlman, Personal interview)
But Perlman believes there is a reason LGBTQ individuals seem to excel at the theatrical arts, particularly as playwrights. “I don’t think it’s an accident,” Perlman says of the disproportionate success gay people have achieved in the theatre. Perlman theorizes that there is a connection between having to hide one’s sexuality and the imagination. The connection stems from existing as a non-heterosexual in a primarily heterosexual world. “For those of us who spent any time in the closet, a lot of our energies were spent imagining, as opposed to always seeing our reality reflected back at us,” he told me. Perlman believes most gay people have spent a lot of time during their childhood and adolescence imagining a different reality. Perlman suspects that “the necessity has born the ability to really imagine not only other lives for ourselves but to imagine other people’s realities.” This lends itself wonderfully to playwriting.

However, this acquired skill also comes with a certain obligation, particularly for gay white men, a demographic many of the most celebrated American playwrights have belonged to. Perlman talks about the “weird line” this group lives on, where they lead lives that are granted the privilege of white men, yet also understand what it is not to be a straight white male. “It is a very interesting place to hold in society,” Perlman said, “and I think that is part of what lends us a sense of empathy, a sense of understanding. We [gay white men] are really the only group that bridges that gap, that lives in both those worlds [privileged and not]” (Perlman, Personal interview).

The Playwrights Respond: Bullying and Teen Suicide - The Next Common Theme for LGBTQ Playwrights?

Although the six playwrights explored in this study all share the common experience of living as a homosexual person in a heterosexual world, they have each addressed the issue of
bullying from different perspectives. This research seeks to understand how each playwright responded to peer-victimization primarily through their work, yet their motivation for, and their experience of, writing about the issue is also of value in order to ascertain differences between their approaches in the plays they have written. Each of these artists has already achieved a level of success and notoriety in that they are actively being produced, and therefore have at least some measure of influence within the American theatre community. Their outlook on the future of LGBTQ theatre, or American Theatre in general, may help us gain insight into what current thematic trends LGBTQ American playwrights are focusing on, or if there even exists the motivation to focus collectively on a single issue, like identity or AIDS.

The approaches taken in each play have already been analyzed, but as a supplement to these analyses, interviews with the playwrights were collected and conducted to ascertain their motivations for writing the play, the reasons for the approach they have taken in their work, their personal experiences with bullying, as well as their opinions on the primary question posed in this dissertation: is bullying becoming a common theme in the post-AIDS era of gay theatre-making?

There is perhaps no playwright in the country right now that is as focused on the problem of LGBTQ youth and bullying as Brian Guehring. He has already demonstrated his passion for the issue in his plays *The Bully Show, Mindless Drooling Teenage Zombie Bullies*, his adaptation of James Howe’s *The Misfits*, as well as his continued work with Pride Players, the queer youth theatre group he helped establish. He recalls his initial reaction to reading James Howe’s popular novel, *The Misfits*, and his motivation for wanting to turn the piece into a stage production:
I wanted to “queerify” children’s theatre as much as possible, but when I came across *The Misfits*, I thought, now this could really work as a play because it’s not so much about just being gay, it’s about bullying, it’s about making schools safe. And because of [the success of] the No Name-Calling program, I thought this had enough support - with the success of the book and the fact that it was framed as not just the gay kid’s story but everyone’s story - I thought that is why this could work right now. (Guehring, Personal interview)

But he has mixed feelings on whether bullying will be a topic LGBTQ playwrights will continue to focus on en masse. “The ‘It Gets Better’ campaign really shows how hot a topic this [gay bullying] is,” he told me, “It brought it to the national attention, it brought it up to the attention of theatre directors, and artists, and educators, who maybe identify as queer, that this is an issue we can no longer ignore, we need to explore. I do think that it is hot.” But by being on the forefront of the issue, in part because of his daily exposure to LGBTQ youth, Guehring has perhaps a broader perspective than most on the subject. He continues: “But I would argue that – and maybe this is me, because I’ve been doing all these bully plays – and I get this from the kids involved in Pride Players – the youth are always pushing us – that now the new issue is about transgender rights, and gender queer issues, and moving beyond the gender binary. I think that’s where we are headed.”

But Guehring was delighted that the question was even being asked, since for so many years he felt his endeavors to address LGBTQ bullying through theatre were somewhat solitary. “I do think it is interesting to look at the American Gay movements in theatre and see how that effects gay studies and gay theatre in general, and I can see that sense of the bullying topic forming, but I think the next thing is going to be about trans issues,” Guehring concluded.
The recent increase in media focus on transgender rights, particularly surrounding North Carolina’s HB2, has brought the issue to the forefront of national attention. HB2, or House Bill 2, also known as the Charlotte Bathroom Bill, states that transgender people may only use the facilities of the gender noted on their birth certificates. The bill states that cities and counties in North Carolina can no longer establish a different standard (Gordon, Price, and Peralta). The bill triggered a national backlash which led to boycotts from businesses, the cancelation of major entertainment performances, and a decision by the National Basketball Association to pull its All-Star Game out of North Carolina in 2017 (Maguire).

Guehring and the Pride Player youth are likely correct in pointing out the upsurge in attention to trans issues. But I would suggest that one of the significant dilemmas facing trans people, especially trans youth, is the verbal and physical harassment they experience due to their gender expression. Peer-victimization of trans youth is still LGBTQ bullying. HB2 amounts to nothing less than state-wide institutional bullying of trans individuals, who face an increased risk of verbal and physical attack when using facilities that are counter to their gender identification (Herman).

Writing about traumatic events that have occurred in one’s life can be difficult, but there is also a challenge in writing about trauma that one is not personally familiar with. This was the case for A. Rey Pamatmat while attempting to truly understand the complex motivations and anxieties of his two characters in after all the terrible things I do. He is one of four playwrights who were greatly affected by the news of Tyler Clementi’s suicide and who attribute their motivations for creating their work to this one event. Spending long periods of time immersed in issues related to bullying and the suicide of young people can be quite
stressful, so Pamatmat added joyful elements to *after all the terrible things I do* that he felt would balance out both the experience of writing the play and the experience of watching it. For him, setting the play in a bookstore and including multiple references to the poetry of Frank O’Hara was key. “I was not bullied, bullying is such a foreign thing to me,” Pamatmat said. “There is such anxiety in the play and in writing it that it became uncomfortable. It was uncomfortable writing [the characters of] two bullies... so I filled the play with things that comfort me: books and Frank O’Hara ... I really am a fan of Frank O’Hara” (Pamatmat, Personal interview).

The poems of Frank O’Hara, especially “A True Account of Talking to the Sun on Fire Island,” serve to help establish the connection between Linda and Daniel. Frank O’Hara’s romantic relationship has many parallels with Daniel’s own troubled relationship. The abstract expressionism found in O’Hara words provide lyrical relief from the harsh reality of two people lashing out at each other in an attempt to alleviate their guilt.

That guilt is the crux of the play and it is shared by both Daniel and Linda. “The play is two bullies coming up against each other,” Pamatmat says, “It’s Daniel’s issues with his own misogyny and masculinity plus Linda’s guilt and anger coming at each other.” For the character of Daniel, who hadn’t known about Isaac’s suicide until the start of the play, that culpability is straightforward. Years ago he expressed his own internalized homophobia through an act of aggression – a forced, violent kiss under the umbrella of a pine tree – and this may have been a contributing factor in Isaac’s suicidality. But for Linda, the guilt is complex and she goes back and forth between casting blame and self-reproach. But Pamatmat hints that her true fault is
not the words she spoke to Isaac when he came to her in need, but that she had failed to teach her son how to function in a world where those attitudes exist:

Ultimately, I do not think other people are responsible for someone else’s suicide. She is feeling guilt and trying to unload that guilt. We acquire the tools to deal with the problems we face, stresses etc. We need to learn resilience, how to become resilient. She didn’t teach him [Isaac] resilience. That is a part of her guilt now. (Pamatmat, Personal interview)

When asked whether or not he felt that bullying and teen suicide might be the next commonly explored theme by American LGBTQ playwrights, Pamatmat’s response was succinct: “Yes, I think it could be. People are writing about it. But it is too early to say how it will compare to the AIDS plays which were such a personal reaction to a specific occurrence” (Pamatmat, Personal interview).

Christopher Shinn’s response to the same question was even more to the point: “I'm not aware of other bullying plays, are you? I am curious about how far that reality can travel in dramatic terms” (Shinn, Personal interview). Those “dramatic terms” are what fascinates Shinn about the theatre and playwriting. His impulse is to create characters that are highly complex and motivated by desires that seem at times contradictory, yet reflect the incongruous reality of the true human behaviors Shinn observes around him. Those complex, contradictory characters are then set against each other within the structure of the plays he writes. Shinn’s style is appealing to many, but understandably frustrating for those who seek clarity and poetic consequence over nuance and the realities of human complexity. Discussing his motivations as a writer, Pamatmat said:
Honesty is the point of drama for me. Things really happen in life. Real people do real things, they really say things... It will always be important to me to represent this reality in a meaningful and truthful way. It is very easy to trash naturalism to cover one's hostility towards reality itself. I think my plays are radical in form and content no matter how much they use established forms and live naturalistically. To me there is always another level there for anyone who wants to see it. That is the level of what I am trying to say, which is always in some way unsayable -- or only sayable through character, action, and drama. (Shinn, Personal interview)

Shinn does acknowledge the significant contributions of the American gay and lesbian playwrights that came before him, particularly Tony Kushner. Shinn credits *Angels in America* with demonstrating the appeal complex characters have, even for Broadway audiences. “When I saw that play, I really thought, *You can be really deep and be on Broadway!* I thought that would happen all the time. If I had known it was really that rare, I maybe would have chosen another field.” He explains the appeal that *Angels in America* had for him: “Nobody had exposed me to the ideas in that play. For people like me who were young, there was no other mainstream play that had that diversity of inspiration”[Emphasis in original] (qtd. in Butler and Kois).

While Christopher Shinn remains unconcerned about thematic trends or what other gay writers might be currently focusing on, Sarah Gubbins feels strongly that playwrights need to deal collectively with the important issues society is now facing. Being “timely” and “relevant” is a way that theatre can create change. Regarding *fml: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life*, Gubbins said, “I've never worked on a play that felt more timely" (qtd. in Morgan). Gubbins believes Dan Savages’ “It Gets Better Project” is a tremendous example of mass creative reaction to an issue. She also acknowledges that the efforts made by generations of gay
activists have helped to make life significantly better for most of today’s LGBTQ youth in terms of social acceptance and cultural attitudes. Gubbins looks at the advantages gay teenagers have today, for example, the prevalence of Gay-Straight Alliances in so many schools, something that didn’t exist when she was in high school. “There’s more visibility. You don’t have to presume that everybody's straight,” Gubbins said. And yet issues still exist, and Gubbins believes that even the “It Gets Better Project” uses too narrow an approach and “the homophobia, homo hatred, gay bullying continues” (qtd. in Isaacs). Discussing specifically how the “It Gets Better Project” attempts to save lives, Gubbins points out that “It's hard when you're told that it gets better,” she said. “The problem is that it's very, very bad for a while and you know sometimes students feel that they're just not strong enough to wait it out” (qtd. in Morgan). Through *fml: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life*, Gubbins attempts to show the obstacles lesbian and gay youth still encounter, which often can be quite violent. The play also underscores how important the support of friends, family, and more specifically, good teachers can be to youth who are encountering peer-victimization. But like Pamatmat, she is not writing from personal experience. Gubbins was not yet out in high school and refers to her younger self as a sexually unaware tomboy who "wasn't chased, wasn't identified" and never suffered the brutal physical attack that the character of Jo does in *fml: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life*. Gubbins has observed that the increased cultural tolerance that has given younger LGBTQ teens the confidence to come out earlier has also triggered resentment from their younger peers. "It's so complicated," she says, "What is it about being out and confident that is so threatening to other people? Things are so much better today, and absolutely as bad” (qtd. in Isaacs).
Concluding Thoughts: The Impact of Tyler Clementi

As mentioned in Chapter One, September 2010 was a month that saw an exceptionally large number of youth suicides that were connected to LGBTQ bullying, including fifteen-year-old Billy Lucas, whose death prompted Dan Savage to write a commentary in his weekly advice column that would lead to the conception of the “It Gets Better Project.” In setting out to find plays for this study, I looked for works that explored bullying or teen suicide as a theme, and then sought to discover if the authors of those works had publicly identified themselves as LGBTQ. Of those plays that met these criteria, I selected six based on a combination of the influence I perceived the playwrights were having (or would have) on the American Theatrical community, and the quality of the work. It was a surprise, then, to discover that four of these plays were directly inspired by the media attention given to the same September 2010 event: the suicide of Tyler Clementi.

The degree to which that inspiration is reflected in the works varies quite a bit. *Teddy Ferrara*, the play that is most obvious in its connection to Tyler Clementi, was an attempt by Christopher Shinn to makes sense of the notion of victimization, and was the result of Shinn’s in-depth research into the events at Rutgers University. In an entry for Howlround, an online theatre blog, Sarah Gubbins wrote about how “angry and shocked and mostly confused” she was by what she was reading in the media about Tyler’s suicide. This motivated her, at the advice of her friend, director Joanie Schultz, to approach Steppenwolf, which in turn led to *fml: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life* (Gubbins, “Confessions of a Reluctant TYA Playwright”). Michael Perlman attributes the heightened media coverage of the Tyler Clementi case as an influential factor in the writing of *From White Plains*. Likewise, A. Rey Pamatmat was intrigued
by what he perceived was a certain shame initially exhibited by Jane Clementi regarding her son’s homosexuality in her comments to the media. The plots of these last three plays, however, reveal little connection to Tyler’s story (Perlman, Personal interview; Pamatmat, Personal interview).

In a month of highly publicized gay-bullying related youth suicides, there was something particularly intriguing about the Tyler Clementi story that deeply affected these four playwrights. There are a number of unique aspects to Tyler’s story that certainly spark the dramatic imagination: the idea that Tyler’s “bully” was a person who slept night after night in the bed across from his; the connection the events had to social media including the webcam footage posted by Ravi and the heartbreaking apologetic final message posted by Tyler on his own Facebook, “Jumping off the GW Bridge sorry”; or perhaps it was the image of Tyler standing on the ledge of the bridge, surrounded by twelve million New Yorkers, and yet feeling so isolated and cut off. These aspects of the Tyler Clementi story, while captivating and perhaps even theatrical, don’t address the specific emotion Sarah Gubbins felt upon reading the story: anger. It was anger that motivated Gubbins to approach Steppenwolf, just as it was rage that made Pamatmat look deeply at how Jane Clementi was responding when questioned about her son’s sexuality. But there is really only one element in Tyler’s story that accounts for this anger and rage, and it is not the connection to social media or the image of Tyler on the bridge. The rage stems from the fact that no one in Tyler’s life was able to give him the one thing he really needed: empathy. While it is hard to fathom how Dharun Ravi could have such little empathy for his roommate that he would repeatedly invade his privacy and publicly humiliate him, it is even more difficult – as Christopher Shinn dramatizes in Teddy Ferrara – to comprehend why, in
the middle of a crowded university campus, Tyler felt there was not a single person he could turn to.

**Concluding Thoughts: The Gender Binary and Difference**

Tarell Alvin McCraney experienced physical torment and harassment on a level far more severe than any other playwright in this survey, and still wakes up from nightmares that he is back in the eighth grade facing his bullies (Hannah-jones). McCraney was brutally terrorized for being different: he was small for his age, he was not athletic or into sports, he was quiet, and he was effeminate. He was called “faggot” before he knew what the word meant. He was beaten often and was hit with stones and bricks and lost several teeth (Adams; Lamont).

McCraney understands the psycho-social currents that exist underneath the bullying he experienced. He refers to himself as “pretty fem” and says that “Back home, they notice that I’m a little less masculine than maybe they’d like” (qtd. in Lamont). For McCraney, and the *Choir Boy* character of Pharus, and so many of the bullied characters in the plays explored in these pages – Joe from *The Misfits*, Jo in *fml: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life*, along with the characters we never get to meet onstage: Isaac in *after all the terrible things I do* and Mitchell in *From White Plains* – gender behavior is at the very heart of all they have experienced. Acting a little “less masculine” or a little “less feminine” than “they’d like” has resulted in their victimization, and in some cases their death. Boys that display feminine traits are viewed – consciously or not – as relinquishing power, specifically, the power that is granted to males in a culture that is still terribly misogynistic. McCraney believes that in Black American culture, this dynamic may exhibit itself in different ways, but it exists to some degree across the board in all American cultures, regardless of race. Masculinity is still associated with superiority, and
dispensing with the inherent privilege of being a male by exhibiting feminine characteristics can be viewed as a threat to the patriarchal systems upon which Western society has been built. Most peer-victimization of effeminate males stems from fear of this threat. McCraney clarifies this dynamic:

First of all, I know that there’s homophobia that is essentially misogyny masked as homophobia in all of American culture no matter how much we try and pretend there is not. That anti-feminism is rampant. It’s people who feel like there is a way to be masculine and that masculinity means a kind of superiority which is just misogyny. So I think that’s endemic in all parts of American society and it just comes out in different ways. I don’t think it’s particular to black culture. It may show itself differently but it’s all part of the same thread. (qtd. in Lee)

From this perspective, a female exhibiting masculine traits, as Jo does in *fml: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life*, is usurping the power of male privilege and is likewise threatening the patriarchal systems that have established the gender binary. Most of the characteristics we associate with femininity and masculinity are socially constructed, and specific behaviors are labeled feminine and masculine by the dominant social group (Sánchez et al. 2). The connection between homophobia and misogyny is evidenced in the enacting of laws criminalizing homosexual behavior in countries that also severely limit the rights of women (“ILGA-RIWI Global Attitudes Survey on LGBTI People”).

At its core, homophobia is the fear of difference. Females or males who exhibit behaviors contrary their biological gender are different, and anything that is different can be perceived as a threat. Ethologically, this may have been connected to a “survival of the herd” instinct. As deLara discusses in her fascinating book, *Bullying Scars*:
Bullying is a mechanism to put anyone who is different outside of the heard, to correct for difference, or to manipulate them into changing to the norm. However, unlike other mammals, when our group members live through exclusion by the majority, there are consequences both to the bullied and to the bulk of human society. (deLara 30–31)

The solution then, as these plays seem to be suggesting, is to evolve. Perhaps this evolution might come about through small steps. Possibly by starting with a single day, a day in which “we all think about the names we call each other and stop using them. Maybe we’ll even stop acting like other people are less than us,” as Bobby suggested in The Misfits (62).

**Concluding Thoughts: Is Bullying Becoming a Common Theme in the Post-AIDS Era of Gay Theatre-making?**

It is likely there will never be another urgent event that compels a multitude of LGBTQ playwrights to focus so exclusively on a single issue the way AIDS did. And perhaps, that is a good thing. While LGBTQ playwrights will certainly continue to write plays about peer-victimization for as long as young lesbian girls or gay boys continue to be disproportionality harassed, bullying will likely be only one of several themes explored. As Michael Perlman said, “I do think bullying has emerged as something to talk about, but I don’t see a predominance of it from gay playwrights. I would say there are a lot more ‘relationship plays’ – works for the stage showing complex gay relationships” (Perlman, Personal interview). Those complex relationships will no doubt be made up of some characters who have been bullied, but that experience will simply add to the complexity.
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